NEW LINE CINEMA
One, two, Freddy's coming for you!
A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET
SUFFER THE CHILDREN
A NOVEL BY DAVID BISHOP
BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM THE MOTION PICTURE A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET CREATED BY WES CRAVEN

ONE

Alex Corwin woke with a start. She had been dreaming an old, familiar dream in which she was flying, swooping and soaring above the suburbs, looking down on everyone going about their little lives, all of them too busy or self-absorbed to see her high in the clouds overhead. Alex loved that dream, the sense of utter freedom and release, but it always ended the same way. She would recognize someone below and call out to them.

"Dad! Dad, I'm up here!" But her father never turned round, never heard her. He got into his car and drove away, leaving her alone in the sky. Suddenly she would be falling, the ground rushing towards her, hands thrown forward to protect her as—

Then she was awake, gasping for breath, her body shaking with sweat glistening on her skin. No matter how often she had that dream, her father never looked at her. He had left them years ago. Alex's mom had torn his face out of every family photo. It was getting so Alex couldn't remember what her father looked like anymore. He was just a man getting into a car and driving away, leaving her behind, abandoning both of them. If he looked back just once, she felt sure all the hurting would go away, but he never did.

Alex pushed the dream aside and tried to focus on her surroundings, but she did not recognize them. The room was a bare white space, perfectly square, its only furniture the hospital gurney on which she was lying. Two of the walls were featureless, while a third had a door with no handle. The fourth wall was a floor to ceiling mirror, its reflective surface stretching from wall to wall. The room had no obvious form of ventilation, yet Alex could feel a cool breeze evaporating the sweat from her skin.

Where was she? No sound crept into the room from outside. There was no smell beyond a whiff of disinfectant to betray her location. The sheet beneath her on the gurney had that over-starched crispness she remembered from two days in a New York hospital while recovering from concussion suffered in a car crash. Perhaps she had been in another accident? The pale blue cotton gown she was

wearing reinforced that notion. But why did she have no memory of coming here? Was she suffering from amnesia? At least she could remember the word "amnesia," that was a good sign. The seventeen year-old could not help smiling at such logic. But what kind of hospital kept you in a room without a door handle? A hospital for crazy people, a dark voice muttered in the back of her mind. She ignored that thought and sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the gurney.

Looking at herself in the mirrored wall, Alex could see no obvious evidence she had been in an accident. Her face showed no wounds or bruises, just the usual smattering of freckles across her cheeks and small, slightly upturned nose. Her coffee-colored hair and skin still showed signs of a summer holiday in Mexico. The only scars visible were on her arms, but those came from old wounds, old hurts—nothing new there. So why was she here? And where was here, exactly?

She slid her weight forward until her feet touched the floor, the linoleum cold beneath her toes. Alex was conscious of the gap at the back of her gown and the fact she was wearing nothing underneath it: no bra, no panties. Anybody standing behind me is going to get a good look at my butt, she thought ruefully. Well, at least it's a cute butt. She walked towards the mirror, reaching one hand out. If this was a dream, her hand would no doubt plunge through the glass like it was water. But the mirror was solid to touch. Perhaps it was two-way? She smirked and gave the finger to anyone on the other side. As an afterthought, Alex turned and flipped up the hem of her gown, flashing her ass at the mirror. Get an eyeful of that, creeps!

The door abruptly swung open and three stern-faced, middle-aged men wearing white doctor's coats bustled in. All were clutching clipboards, ballpoint pens safely stored in plastic pocket protectors. Two of the men wore heavy, black-rimmed glasses that had been out of fashion for at least a decade, while the other had mismatched argyle socks. Psychiatrists, Alex realized in an instant, her heart sinking. She was back in the clutches of the headshrinkers. What had she done this time?

An orderly followed the doctors inside, clad in a white hospital smock and pants, matching white sneakers on his feet. He winked at Alex, rolling his eyes at the doctors in a gesture of sympathy, but his pinched features and piercing eyes only made her more conscious of how little she was wearing. The orderly carried four stacked plastic chairs into the room, setting three of them down in a row. The fourth was positioned several feet away, facing the others. The lead doctor pointed impatiently at the gurney and the orderly wheeled it out, the door shutting behind him. The doctors sat beside each other, the man in the middle obviously their leader. He gestured for Alex to sit opposite them.

"Miss Corwin? Could you join us?" His voice had the bland, studied tones Alex had heard so many times before. Nothing threatening, nothing intimidating, all soothing words and quiet phrases. Don't get the patient excitable, don't express an emotion, keep everything under control. It made her want to scream.

"What if I don't want to?"

"That's entirely up to you, but you will feel more comfortable if you sit."

"Why? How long will this take?"

"How long do you think it should take?"

"Spare me the 'What do *you* think?' bullshit, okay?" Alex sauntered over to the chair and flipped it sideways before sitting. She had no intention of giving these three assholes a free peepshow. "I've been in and out of therapy since I was thirteen. Just ask your fucking questions and let's get this over with."

All three men began making notes, pens scratching hurriedly against the pages on their clipboards. Their leader looked up again and smiled. "I'm sorry, you must think me terribly rude. I am Doctor Herbert Wallace and these are my colleagues, Doctors—"

"Nim and Rod?" Alex suggested.

"Kaufman and Jones, actually."

"Whatever." Alex folded her arms and was rewarded with more scribbling. "Let me guess: patient displays defensive body language, coupled with a confrontational attitude and aggressive choice of vocabulary?"

The scribbling stopped. "How did you—"

"Like I said, I know the drill. Cut to the fucking chase, Herb."

"It's Herbert."

"Like I give a shit, Herb."

Wallace set his clipboard aside and smiled insincerely. "Fine. I will cut to the chase, as you put it. Why do you harm yourself?"

"Harm myself?" Alex shifted in her seat. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. Those scars on your forearms, the ones you always tell people came from a rather vicious cat your family once had. You made those scars yourself. It's a recognized psychiatric condition, known as self-harming."

"No, you're wrong—"

"You took a razor blade from the bathroom cabinet at home one day and slowly, methodically drew the sharpened edge across your arm until it sliced through the skin."

Alex shook her head. "No, I—"

"You were angry and you didn't know why. You were stressed and you didn't know how to cope. You felt lonely in a crowded room, alone among people who claimed to be your friends. So when you were by yourself you would take a blade and cut yourself."

"That isn't—"

"You couldn't cry. You couldn't talk about your problems; you *wouldn't* talk about your problems. If somebody forced you to talk, then you would lie. You weren't sure what was real and what wasn't. You probably still aren't sure, even now. You used people and you hurt people, and then you began hurting yourself. Isn't that right?"

Alex's fingers were clenched around the hem of her gown, knuckles growing white, her head shaking from side to side. "No, no!"

"You would slice the skin open and expose your flesh. Blood would start flowing and it made you feel better, made you feel your pain was being released, as if the blood-letting was draining off all the misery, all the hurt. You couldn't cry tears so you made tears from your own blood."

"You've got it wrong. You don't—"

"You did it to get attention. You wanted to be nurtured, to be cared for, to be looked after. You were turning all your aggression, all your anger, all your hatred back in on yourself, blaming yourself, hurting yourself."

"No! No!"

"You did it because of your need to control others, to control your environment, even when you couldn't control yourself. You did it because you hated yourself and everyone around you, and the pain made you feel better."

Alex threw her chair aside and ran to the door, her fingers clawing at the edges, trying to find a way out, desperate to get a grip. But her fingers felt numb and useless.

"Did you abuse yourself in other ways, Alex? Is that why you can't talk about this? Are you too ashamed to admit what you've been doing?" Wallace was behind her now, looming over her, his breath hot on the back of her neck, the smell of boiled eggs and stale coffee and body odor assaulting her nostrils. She had to get away from here, away from him. She had to escape.

"Still got nothing to tell us, young lady? Not so clever now, are we? Not so high and mighty." Wallace turned away, snapping his fingers in the air. "Bring in her mother." he shouted. The door opened inwards, pushing Alex back.

Mrs Corwin was ushered in by the orderly and was given the chair that Alex had been sitting on. She's been crying, Alex realized, recognizing the telltale puffiness and redness around the eyes. Probably about me. Her mom was dressed in a crisp white top and faded blue jeans, a Kleenex clutched in one hand. The years of struggle had left their scars, but she had kept in shape, always hoping to find a new man. Alex looked at her mom and knew she was looking at her own future. In twenty-five years I'll have the same wrinkles and a bottle of hair dye always stocked in the bathroom. Mrs Corwin sank into the seat and smiled hopefully at her daughter. The orderly closed the door and stood in front of it, blocking the only exit. He smiled at Alex, but something about his face unsettled her. He almost looked... hungry.

Dr Wallace was back in his own seat. He cleared his throat to get the new arrival's attention. "Mrs Corwin, we were hoping you might be able to help us with the questions young Alexandra seems unable or unwilling to answer."

"Of course," she replied. "I want her to get better. I want my baby to stop hurting herself."

"As do we all," Wallace said. "When did she start cutting herself?"

"I guess that was five... no, four years ago. After she turned thirteen. You see, my husband had left us and the split was quite traumatic."

"So you think that triggered these... incidents."

"That's what other doctors have told me." Alex's mom frowned. "But I've tried to move on since then. Why hasn't she?"

"Perhaps there is another cause," Wallace suggested. "Can you tell us when your daughter had her first period?"

Mrs Corwin's face betrayed her shock. "Please, doctor, I'm not sure —"

"Forgive my bluntness, but we are trying to uncover difficult truths here. If you cannot answer the simplest of questions, no matter how personally embarrassing, I don't see how you can expect us to help your daughter."

She nodded uncertainly. "It was her thirteenth birthday. She was having a party with friends and there was an accident..."

"Had Alexandra begun cutting herself before that?"

"No. It began a few months later. But I don't see—"

Wallace held up a hand for silence. "Recent papers in medical journals have suggested a new theory to explain self-harming. I believe it may be applicable in the case of Alexandra."

"My name's Alex, creep." But nobody paid her any attention.

"I have one last question, Mrs Corwin. Has your daughter had her first sexual experience yet, to the best of your knowledge?"

"Mom! Don't answer that. You don't have to answer that."

"No, I don't think so," Mrs Corwin said and smiled sweetly. "We move around the country a lot, due to my job, so it hasn't been easy for her to make friends. There have been a few boys sniffing around, but I managed to keep them away."

"Indeed. Well, that's most illuminating:" Wallace began consulting in whispers with his colleagues while Mrs Corwin smirked at her daughter.

"Yes, I think the little bitch is still a virgin."

Alex staggered back a step, shocked at what her mom was saying. How could she know that? Why was she saying these things? It didn't make sense. Wallace and his colleagues had come to a conclusion. The trio stood up to deliver their diagnosis.

"Mrs Corwin, we believe your daughter is sublimating her latent sexual desires, perhaps from guilt, perhaps from some deeper self-loathing. Rather than deal with the reality of sexual penetration she has been using razor blades to penetrate her skin, to simulate the same blood flow many female virgins experience after their hymen is broken. It is a medically proven fact that cutting causes the body to release its own opiate-like chemicals to reduce pain. Some self-harmers become addicted to their body's heroin-like reaction to extreme pain, as sexual addicts crave the release of orgasm. Alexandra is an extreme case, but..."

Alex felt herself screaming denials, but nobody was listening. Wallace and the other doctors were clustered around her mom, comforting her. They led her out of the room, ignoring all of Alex's protestations. As they departed, Wallace told the orderly to sedate the patient so treatment could begin immediately. The door closed, leaving Alex and the orderly in the stark white chamber. The teenager was still shaking her head in disbelief. This couldn't be real, this couldn't be happening, she thought to herself.

"Oh, it's real, alright," the orderly whispered, licking his lips. He peeled off his white smock to reveal a dirty red and green sweater underneath. Alex noticed the orderly's hospital-issue pants were now jeans stained with oil and what looked like splashes of fresh blood. Instead of white, soft-soled sneakers he was wearing battered work boots.

But most disturbing was his skin. It was changing, as if being cooked while still stretched across his body. Burn scars appeared on the face and hands, while the stench of roasting flesh pulsated from him. Alex gagged involuntarily, holding a hand over her mouth to

stop herself vomiting. The orderly howled in pain and doubled over, twisting away from her into a crouch.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "Are you alright?"

"Never better," the orderly replied, straightening up again. He produced a battered felt hat, put it on his head, and swiveled round to face Alex. The features were still recognizable as those of the orderly, but now the skin was healed like a decades-old wound and the eyes shone with malevolence. His face was a grotesque, repulsive parody of what had been there before.

"Who are you?" she whispered, backing away.

"You're new in town," he leered. "I guess that's why you don't know me. The children call me Freddy. We're going to be very good friends."

"I don't think so," Alex replied. She wanted to run, but her legs felt so weak she could hardly stand. She wanted to scream, but it died in her throat. She was helpless and terrified. A dentist's chair appeared behind her and she tumbled backwards into it. Metal clamps swung into place, locking her into the chair. The heaviest clamp pressed her back against the black leather, while more bands of metal pinned her arms and legs in place. The orderly smiled, cruel lips drawn back to reveal yellow teeth and rotting gums. He stood to one side of Alex, crouching forward so his face was close to hers. Gleaming eyes stared into hers, while his foul breath invaded her lungs.

"The doctors say you like to cut yourself."

"I don't do that anymore," Alex said, her blue eyes wide with fear.

"Perhaps I can lend you a hand?" He raised his right arm in front of Alex's face. The hand was encased in a battered old glove, torn and threadbare across the palm. Metal rings encased each finger. Clamped to these were four blades, each extending outwards into razor-sharp blades of metal. The orderly flexed his fingers and the blades clanged crisply against each other, like so many butcher's knives. He brought the slithers of metal closer to Alex's face.

"Now, where should I start cutting? I'll let you choose."

Alex shook her head, too terrified to speak.

"The face? You want me to cut your face first?"

"No!" she gasped.

"Spoilsport. What about your chest?" He slashed downwards, his fingerknives neatly slicing four long cuts into the fabric of her gown. Alex looked down, but no blood was visible. The blades had just missed her skin. Her tormentor used his free hand to pull apart the fabric, exposing Alex's pert breasts. "My, my, you are the little cutie," he chuckled. "Good enough to eat."

He reached forward with his gloved hand and rested the flat side of one blade against her left nipple. She jumped with shock at the touch of cold metal against her skin. "Careful!" he warned, his voice guttural. "You almost made me slice something off!" He threw back his head and laughed. Alex could feel a cold sweat of terror soaking the back of her gown.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked helplessly.

"Because I enjoy it," he replied, his breath hot and heavy on her face. "And so do you, bitch. Now, where was I? Oh yes, letting it bleed." The orderly removed his fingerknives from Alex's chest and placed them against one of her arms instead. The blades sliced deep into her flesh, blood oozing up around the shiny metal and trickling down on to the floor. She cried out in pain, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

"Was it good for you, too?" he asked, licking the blood from his blades. "Slicing your arms is all very well, but if you want the real deal, I'll have to cut you in other places." He reached his gloved hand down between her legs, the blades slowly drawing back the fabric of the gown to reveal her upper thighs. Alex tried to force her legs together, but the cold metal clamps kept them apart.

"No, no, please," she begged.

"Your mouth says no but your eyes say yes," he taunted, flicking his tongue rapidly backward and forward between his snarling lips in a grotesque lapping motion. "I'll be the first to taste your cherry pie, little girl. You should thank me." He leaned forward and licked a tear from the side of her face. His gloved hand drew back from between Alex's legs, ready to plunge down and into her. "Are you ready for me? Here comes Daddy!"

"Noooooooooooooooo—"

***

Alex woke with a start. She sat bolt upright in bed, still panting with terror, heart hammering inside her chest. She looked around the bedroom. She was home, she was safe. It had been a dream, just a very bad dream: a nightmare. She flopped back into the pillows, still trying to catch her breath. It had been so real. She could still smell the fetid breath of that thing, that monster that had been about to...

"Alex? Are you alright, honey?" Her mom was calling from downstairs, the smell of cooking bacon signaling breakfast was nearly ready.

"Yeah, Mom, I'm fine!" Alex called, but she still searched the room for reassurance. Everything was as she remembered: the computer on a desk in the corner, her iPod and headphones next to it. An old stereo and a pile of CDs stood in another corner, neglected and gathering dust. The usual carpet of dirty clothes was strewn across the floor, an obstacle course of T-shirts and discarded lingerie. The rest of the bedroom was cluttered with half open boxes. They'd been here for two months and Alex still hadn't unpacked everything, but that was habit. Her mom's frequent job relocations meant it wasn't worth doing. You only had to pack it all again, usually less than a year later.

Alex sat up and winced at stabbing pains in her right arm. She pulled back the covers to find four fresh cuts sliced into the flesh, blood still dribbling from the wounds. A crimson stain mottled her sheets where her arm had been. What the fuck? It had only been a nightmare, hadn't it? The cuts were exactly like the ones that creep had given her in the dream. But it that was just a nightmare, and it left only one explanation. "Terrific," she muttered. "Now I'm cutting myself in my sleep."

"Alex, hurry up! You'll be late for school!" her mom shouted.

The hits keep on coming, the teenager thought ruefully. "I'll be down in a minute, okay?" She got out of bed, nursing her wounded arm. First things first, I need to find a dressing. Alex took a look at her cuts. Forget that, I need several dressings. Then she had to hide

the bloodstained sheets. If her mom saw those it would be a short trip back to the psychiatric ward, and Alex had no wish to revisit her own version of *Girl, Interrupted*.

***

The first thing Peter O'Mahoney did after waking was switch on his computer. It was the same every morning, whether it was Christmas Day or just another Thursday like today. Before he brushed his teeth or pulled on his jeans, even before he put on his glasses, Peter hit the button that gave him access to the world outside. Want to listen to the radio? You could do that via the web. Got the urge to watch the hottest TV shows? Then you could download the latest episode to your hard drive overnight, sometimes before it had even aired. Need to talk to a friend? Enter a chat room or, better yet, instant message them. Wake up with a raging hard-on and in need of some quick relief? The web was your friend there too, offering an array of hardcore delights only a mouse click away.

Shit, he could go anywhere, do anything, be anyone he wanted online, all without leaving his bedroom. That suited Peter just fine. The less time he had to spend with his dad, the better. All they ever did was argue. You should get outside more. It isn't healthy staying in your bedroom all the time. You'll go blind if you keep staring at that computer all night. Blah blah, on and on it went, the same old mantra. Peter had downloaded a fistful of medical papers from online journals to prove his father wrong, but the old bastard had thrown them in the trash. Don't get smart with me, young man, I'm still your father and you *will* respect me! Peter fantasized about his father blowing a blood vessel, popping the vein that bulged on his forehead when he got angry.

While still a child, Peter decided he must have been adopted, or else his mom had slept with a college professor while his dad was out of town. That was the only credible explanation for the stark differences between father and son. Brian O'Mahoney was a forty-five year-old construction foreman, a proud, blue collar working man with dirt under his fingernails and a busted knee from his days as a

linebacker. He had met Peter's mom while in hospital after his knee blew out and the pair got married young, both still in their late teens. Peter was born a few months later. Premature birth was his folks' explanation. Shotgun wedding was Peter's calculation, when he was old enough to do the math.

Life had been okay while his mom was still alive. She worked a lot of night shifts but doted on her son, called Peter her special boy. The cancer that killed her had been slow and painful, months of chemotherapy followed by a terminal decline. But even at the funeral, Peter never once saw his father cry. He was a man's man and real men didn't cry. Maybe if I'd been a brain dead jock like him, we'd have something to talk about, Peter thought. We'd crack open a beer and sit out on the porch, bullshitting about scrimmaging and touchdowns, and scoring with cheerleaders. But the only cheerleaders Peter got close to were the ones that undressed on his computer screen, coyly sucking on one finger while slipping their other hand inside their white cotton panties.

"Peter! What did I tell you about putting out the garbage?" The voice thundered through the walls, a bellow of suppressed fury.

"I'll do it before I catch the bus."

"You'll do it now, young man."

"Yes, sir." Peter sighed and shook his head while shutting down the computer. The sooner I graduate and get away from this place, the better. Peter tugged his jeans on over his shorts, pulled a checked shirt over his head and stuffed his feet into his sneakers lurking by the door. He paused in front of the mirror, trying to recreate the habitual side parting in his brown hair without much success.

"You better not be ignoring me, young man."

"I'm coming, I'm coming." Peter shouted back. "Don't get your panties in a bunch," he whispered to himself.

A heavy fist hammered against the door. "What did you say?" his dad demanded. Peter undid the lock and opened the door.

"I said I'm coming?"

***

Not for the first time Alex was grateful that she had her own bathroom. The house was way too large for the two of them, but Alex wasn't complaining. They had moved to Springwood during the summer break and the most decent places in the Ohio town had been outside their price range, especially as a rental. It was Alex who found this house while surfing the web. It was fully renovated and remodeled since the last occupants had left, with four bedrooms, plenty of living rooms and a basement offering extensive storage space. A nice, quiet neighborhood, within walking distance to the high school and dirt cheap. What was the catch?

The realtor even tried to talk them out of inspecting the property. "It's been empty for a year," he said, refusing to go inside. "The last residents left after an... unfortunate incident. There was a murder, and it wasn't the first in that house."

"Next you'll be telling us the Manson family stopped here on their way through Ohio," Alex's mom had joked. They searched the house but could find no evidence of the atrocities supposed to have happened inside. Three days later they were the new residents of 1428 Elm Street. Alex had noticed the secretary at her new school giving her a strange look when she mentioned the address while enrolling. The behavior of other residents in Elm Street was just as odd.

Most times when Alex and her mom arrived in a new town the busybody neighbors couldn't wait to knock on the door and introduce themselves. Springwood was different. Nobody popped round, nobody said hello, and passers-by didn't even glance at the house from the sidewalk. In fact, they seemed to go out of their way to avoid looking at the house. Anybody walking a dog crossed the road before drawing level with the place. Whatever happened here in the past, it had freaked out the locals big time. Intrigued, Alex searched the Internet to find out more, but could find no record of their new home. It was almost as if all mention of the murders and their cause had been erased.

Alex staunched the bleeding from her cuts and taped a makeshift dressing around the arm. That would have to do until after school when she could stop at a drug store and get a proper bandage.

Satisfied with the repair job, Alex peeled off the old checked shirt she usually wore in bed and had a quick shower. She toweled herself dry, then pulled on a fresh pair of panties and a white T-shirt. Green combat trousers and matching shirt finished the ensemble. A handful of gel spiked her boyish shock of hair, maintaining the androgynous exterior. Alex had been through enough schools to know looking anonymous meant nobody bothered you, and that suited her. Don't get attached and you won't get hurt. Satisfied, she grabbed the iPod and headphones, shoved them into her backpack and headed for the kitchen.

***

"Shouldn't you be at the gym by now?" Chris Harris looked up to see his father walk into the kitchen, knotting a tie.

Chris gestured at his little sister beside him, her homework spread across the table. She was biting her bottom lip while writing letters of the alphabet into her schoolbook. "I'm helping Marion with her ABCs."

Gideon Harris stopped in the doorway and glared at his eighteen year-old son. "Don't take that tone of voice with me."

"I'm sorry, sir. It's..." Chris's head sank forward.

"It's what? Look at me when you're talking."

Chris forced himself to meet his father's gaze. "I promised Marion I'd help her, but Coach kept us back late last night after the game to run drills, so this is the only spare time I've got."

Marion smiled hopefully, proudly displaying the new teeth that had come through over the summer. "Please, Daddy, can Chris help me?"

Their father was adamant. "Sorry, Marion, your brother has got other commitments and responsibilities he must meet first. He'll never win that scholarship unless he puts the hours in and shows he's got what it takes to step up."

The little girl's face dropped again. "Yes, Daddy," she said disconsolately.

"Isn't that right, Chris?" Gideon asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I'm glad we agree. Marion, go brush your teeth and then I'll drive you to school." She nodded obediently and hurried to the bathroom upstairs, leaving Chris and his father alone in the kitchen. Gideon poured a cup of coffee from the pot, adding enough milk to make the liquid match the coloring of his brown skin. "The college scout is due in two weeks, son. You need to be at your best to impress him. There are plenty of other boys chasing that scholarship ride."

Chris rose and collected his gym bag from beside the washing machine. The smell of freshly laundered clothing drifted up from inside. No matter how busy she was, Chris's mother always found time to make sure he had clean workout gear. "Sir, I was wondering..."

"Yes, Chris?" Gideon put down the coffee and looked intently at this son.

"I..." Chris's nerve failed him. "It's nothing. Nothing important."

"Alright then. You better get off to the gym."

"Yes, sir. Have a good day."

"You too, son." Gideon picked up the *Springwood Chronicle* from the kitchen table and began reading the front page.

Chris watched his father for a moment before walking out of the kitchen door, ducking his head beneath the top of the frame. Being over six feet tall had plenty of advantages on the basketball court, but the Harris family home was not designed for people of above average height. A modest three-bedroom house, it was always kept clean and tidy. They might be the poorest family on Elm Street, but Chris's father maintained it was no excuse for being slovenly. Don't give our white neighbors any excuse to look down their noses at us, he often said. Have pride in your appearance and you'll be respected.

Chris's long stride hurried him along Elm Street towards school. He could feel his stomach churning, anger at his own cowardice seething inside. It's nothing important! No, just the rest of my life I wanted to talk about, he thought unhappily. Every time he tried to bring the subject up, his father would look at him with that same, stark expression. Those dark brown eyes, that expectant face, it all said one thing: we're counting on you, Chris. We've worked all our

lives to give you this chance, so you can't back out now. How can I tell him that Coach is threatening to drop me from the team? Chris started running, not noticing the teenager in glasses struggling to carry bags of garbage out of a nearby house. Right now, Chris didn't want to see anyone, he just wanted to escape.

***

"Oh, Alex," her mom said despairingly. "You're not wearing that again, are you? You'll never get a boyfriend if you dress like that, dear."

Alex snorted derisively. "Have you seen the boys in this town, Mom?" She opened the fridge and emptied a carton of juice from the door into a glass.

"Yes, but you'll scare them away in that." Joyce was wearing an immaculate blue jacket and shirt, her blouse crisply ironed and makeup perfectly applied. "You need to take more care with your appearance, otherwise nobody will want to take care of you."

Alex rolled her eyes while sliding three strips of bacon into a hot dog roll. "I can take care of myself. Besides, that's the last thing most boys want to do."

"Well, at least sit down to eat your breakfast."

"Can't. I'm running late, remember?" Alex swallowed the last of her juice and was already striding toward the door, taking the rest of breakfast with her.

"Alexandra Marie Corwin, you will stop right there!"

Alex sighed. Her full name only got used when her mom had something important to say. Alex swung round slowly. "You called?"

Joyce shook her head in exasperation. "Alex, look, I'm as sick of moving as you, okay? But this time I think we're going to be here for a while, a year at least. You need to put some roots down, like I'm trying to do."

"Country clubs and yoga classes aren't really my thing, Mom."

"You know what I mean. You've got such a sweet face, you could make so much more of yourself."

Alex scowled. "Can I go?"

"Why don't you invite some friends home from school one night?"

"Because I don't have any friends, okay? Satisfied, Mom?"

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Save the speech for later, I've gotta go." Alex stormed from the kitchen, grabbing her rucksack from the hallway. But her mother wasn't giving up yet, and followed her to the front door.

"What time will you be home?"

"Late. I've got detention!" Alex snapped as she slammed the door shut.

"What did you do this time?" Joyce shouted after her daughter.

But Alex was already out of earshot.

TWO

"Happy birthday, darling!" Tammy Sutherland jingled a set of car keys in the air.

"Mom, you haven't..." Heather said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Well, my little princess needs a set of wheels if she plans to go for those auditions in Cincinnati next month." Tammy threw her daughter the keys. "It's out on the drive. Your uncle Ted's been keeping it on his lot for us."

Heather ran to the kitchen window and looked outside. A sporty little convertible was parked on the drive, a gigantic pink bow stuck to the hood. "I don't believe it! Where did you get the money?"

Tammy smiled thinly. "I borrowed it from your trust fund, and Ted gave me a rate. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be able to pay me back from your first modeling job." She lit a cigarette and sighed. "I can't believe my little baby is eighteen. I remember the day I brought you home from the hospital."

Heather's happiness turned to a scowl. "You took the money from my trust fund? That's supposed to pay for college, Mom."

Her mother waved such concerns away, all the while adjusting her blonde bouffant hair in one of the many mirrors lining the walls of their house. "You don't want to bother your pretty little head about things like that, darling. When you're a famous model or Miss America, nobody will care whether you went to college or not."

"I'll care, Mom."

"Hush!" Tammy went to Heather's side and pointed at the convertible. "Look at that car. Why are you worrying about college when you could be planning all the fun you'll be having behind the wheel of that? Or even in the back seat, if you know what I mean." Tammy gave her daughter an elbow in the side before bursting into a raucous, cackling laugh. "My oh my, the things I got up to in the back seat of a convertible when I was your age, it would make your hair curl, darling, it would make your hair curl."

"Yes, Mom."

Tammy peered at her daughter's blonde hair. "Speaking of which, I think it's time you went back to the salon. Your roots are starting to show through."

Heather pulled away from her mother. "They're fine, Mom."

"Whatever you say, darling. I thought it might be nice if we went along together, had a day of pampering ourselves, what do you say?"

"It's Thursday. I've got school, remember?"

"Oh yes," Tammy wandered away distractedly, one hand reaching for a bottle of gin. "Well, off you go. Learn all you want, but remember what your mom taught you, too."

How to get drunk before ten in the morning? Yeah, that's one life lesson they don't cover at school, Heather thought sourly on her way out. But her bitterness softened at the sight of the car on the driveway. Mom might be the biggest lush on Elm Street, but she was right about one thing. Having your own car meant independence and Heather planned to enjoy every second of it. She ripped the bow off the hood and threw it to one side before climbing in, sliding her slim, toned body behind the wheel. A twist of the key in the ignition and the engine roared into life. Heather glanced at her watch. There was time for a quick spin around the block before heading into school. Of course, it had been a while since she went to driver's ed, but the basics couldn't be so easily forgotten, could they? One pedal to give it gas, the other one to brake. Thank god this wasn't a stick; she'd never got the hand of gears, even on her bicycle. Heather smiled and reversed out of the drive at speed, tires squealing in protest.

***

Joyce watched through a downstairs window as Alex ran off along Elm Street. "Congratulations," she muttered to herself, "another master class in mother-daughter bonding." Joyce looked up the stairs to her daughter's bedroom. Normally the door was locked, Alex was fiercely protective about maintaining some privacy, but today it was ajar. Joyce speed-dialed her secretary's voice mail. "Martha? I'm gonna to be a little late this morning. My first appointment isn't until eleven and I'll be there well before that, so hold my calls until I

arrive, okay? Thanks." Joyce switched off the phone, took a deep breath and ventured upstairs, anxiety etched into her features.

It had been a year since Alex last went to therapy. The psychiatrist in North Carolina declared that the teenager was free of the troubles that had driven her to self-harming. Privately, he had warned Joyce to watch for signs of any reoccurrence or symptoms that Alex was lapsing back into her old ways. "Sometimes the feelings that led to destructive behavior patterns in the past can swell up again, pushing the subject back into the same vicious cycle. Keep an eye on your daughter, but don't make her feel like she's being watched every minute of the day. Respect her privacy—up to a point."

Joyce had done her best to follow the psychiatrist's advice. It wasn't easy for them, always moving from one place to another, but Joyce had a good feeling about Springwood. The town was quiet and friendly, the people at her office more welcoming than most. Hearing about what had happened in this house was a little disturbing, but that was all in the past. They were making a fresh start. Please let this place turn out well for us, Joyce prayed silently as she ventured into her daughter's bedroom.

It was like a scene from some cop show after a burglary: clothes were strewn across the floor, drawers hanging open, debris littering every surface. But that was typical of most teenagers' bedrooms in Joyce's limited experience. She'd be more worried if it was tidy. Since puberty, the chaotic state of Alex's life had become a badge of honor, and her bedroom was a symptom of that. I guess I should be grateful she's a girl, at least the smell can be masked by deodorant and body spray. Joyce sifted through a few drawers and nudged aside the piles of discarded clothing to look underneath, but could find nothing out of the ordinary. No pills, no syringes, no little plastic bags with traces of white powder inside. No signs of any drug use, or at least nothing obvious.

The adjoining bathroom was another story. Blood was pooled in the sink along with a dozen blood-soaked tissues, while a crimson-stained sheet had been shoved into the wastebasket. Joyce's face fell. "Oh, no," she whispered before shaking her head. "Don't jump to conclusions, Joyce. Maybe she's having a heavy month." She

returned to the bedroom and examined her daughter's mattress. There was blood there, but it was beside the pillows, not further down.

"Oh, Alex," she said sadly. "You promised you wouldn't do this again... You promised." Joyce sat down on the bed and wept, a trickle of black mascara rolling down each cheek.

***

Kat Walker hated going to Springwood High. She hated the teachers, she hated the other students, and she hated the lessons. She hated the cliques and their members: the jocks, the princesses, the stoners, the geeks, every fucking one of them. She hated the school building, its brick walls and concrete entrance, its hallways lined with lockers, its enthusiastic banners proclaiming the glorious achievements of the sports teams, its trophy cabinet crammed with prizes won by students past and present. She hated everything about it with every fiber of her being. The sooner somebody torched the place, the better.

It's not like she was planning to go on some crazed teen rampage in the hallways—only losers and psychos went that far. Kat just wanted out: out of high school, out of Springwood, out of the whole fucking state of Ohio. It was probably a nice place to live if you believed in nice and had enjoyed your frontal lobotomy. But having to sing the state song at assembly ("Beautiful Ohio," I mean give me a fucking break!) or recite the state motto ("With God All Things Are Possible") made her want to puke. How Stepford could you get?

Of course, by comparison to life at home, going to school was like being let out of jail on day release. If Springwood High was middle America writ large, Kat's home life was straight out of *Carrie*. The Walkers were a devout Christian family. No, scratch that, devout didn't cover it; try committed. As in they should be committed, Kat decided, flicking cigarette ash out of her bedroom window. Fundamentalist Christians? No, just mentalists. Prayers in the morning, saying grace before every meal, prayers before and after lunch, prayers in the evening, Bible classes, the Ten Commandments

on the bathroom door opposite the toilet so you couldn't escape the Lord even while taking a dump. Kat smiled at that. So many times she'd resisted the temptation to wipe her ass on that list of Thou Shalt Nots and leave it lying around, just to see the look on her parents' faces.

The pair of them would go apeshit, that much she was certain of. There'd be no turning the other cheek that night. It would be straight to Defcon Five and no stopping. She remembered the day she came home with her first tattoo, at the age of twelve. It was only a small image and three words, high on her right arm, hidden by the fabric of her blouse, but Dad had decided to hold a spot inspection, because cleanliness was next to godliness. Yeah, right, like the Almighty was looking for skid marks in your tidy-whiteys. Her mom had found the tattoo and freaked out, dropping to her knees and praying for forgiveness, begging to know why their eldest daughter had brought such shame upon the family. Dad favored the direct route, dragging Kat to the laundry and scrubbing her arm with a wire brush until the skin was shredded, the flesh beneath bloody and raw.

Kat waited a year before she broke the rules again. On her thirteenth birthday she proudly announced at the dinner table that Bobby Chambers had popped her cherry the night before. It was a lie, but it was worth the thrashing she received to see the horror on her parents' faces. Plainly they were coming to the conclusion their beloved Katherine was possessed by a demon, or perhaps by Lucifer himself. Kat spent summer at Bible camp, getting deprogrammed by a lay minister who swore he could drive the devil from her. At least, that was how it started. By the end of the summer he was in jail for having sex with a minor and Kat was two months pregnant. She lost the baby, but by then her parents had surrendered all hope of saving their firstborn. They concentrated on the other four children, keeping contact with Kat to a minimum and forbidding her from speaking with her brothers and sisters.

Kat had responded with an escalating series of outrages. First came more tattoos, until half her body was covered in ink, most of it involving snakes, Satan or other Christian-baiting sacrileges. Next was the body piercing: a dozen studs in each ear, then on to both

nostrils, then her eyebrows, her tongue, her belly button, even her nipples. By the time she was running of out body parts to get pierced, Kat had to cross the state line to find somewhere her parents hadn't picketed with their fundamentalist friends. Smoking and swearing were obligatory to get a rise from her parents, while lying was second nature. Shit, they could ask her if it was sunny outside on a hot day and Kat would claim it was snowing, purely out of habit. But Elijah and Ruth had given up talking to her, preferring to break into prayer whenever she appeared at home, imploring the good Lord above to save their lost lamb. Only a local bylaw stating parents were responsible for their offspring until the age of eighteen prevented them from throwing her out of the house.

What a crock of shit, Kat thought before tossing her cigarette into the immaculately kept rose garden beneath her window. Well, it was nearly nine. Time to drag her sorry ass into school. She spent more time in detention than she did in class, but it was a good place to score some weed off Springwood High's resident dope dealer. Kat felt like getting high and was fresh out of supplies. She dug around in her khaki army surplus rucksack, but found nothing more useful than a lighter and half a pack of Camels. Need some of the folding green before I can see Lloyd. He might be a grade-A stoner, but Kat already owed him fifty bucks. She'd need to filch some dead presidents from her mom to fund any further off-your-face fun.

Kat caught sight of herself in the full-length mirror opposite her bed. Six foot tall, her fearsome Gothic appearance daunted all but the cockiest of men, and that suited her fine. Aside from the many areas covered with tattoos, her skin was pure white, almost translucent. A mass of dyed, jet-black hair surrounded her face, the metal of her pierced studs and rings glinting in the morning light.

She changed her panties and pulled a black long-sleeved top on over her bra-less breasts; prominent nipples were another way of announcing her wanton, godless ways, according to her parents. Kat had tried pointing out the Bible didn't stipulate how women kept control of their tits, but got a slap across the face for her temerity. Well, at least nobody came into her bedroom any more, not since the time mom came in to collect laundry and found Kat getting busy in

front of the mirror. Kat was left to wash her own sheets and clothes after that. She stepped into an ankle-length black skirt, pulled on her black boots and left the house, stopping only to steal sixty bucks from the Maxwell House coffee can hidden in the kitchen.

It was a glorious day outside, with the sun climbing into the cloudless blue sky. Kat slid her black sunglasses into place, shielding her eyes from the bright light. "Another beautiful day in paradise," she sneered. "God, I hate this fucking place."

***

Alex timed her arrival to perfection, approaching the main entrance to Springwood High as first bell rang inside. The school was a sturdy brick and concrete structure from the 1950s, a stained glass window over the front doors trying to create the impression that it was a cathedral of learning. Built to deal with the post-war surge of baby boomers reaching adolescence, Springwood High had stood the test of time well.

After first bell, students had five minutes to collect whatever books they needed for the morning's lessons from their lockers and reach the relevant classroom. In their favored haunts, smokers were taking last drags on cigarettes before stubbing them out, while those looking to make trouble were reluctantly surrendering their latest victims. Students without the protection of a clique had five minutes to ghost through the halls, hit their locker and then hurry to class. Alex had been at enough high schools to know her status in the food chain. She was fresh meat at Springwood and had to be on her guard. Don't attract attention, don't catch anybody else's eye, keep your head down and you could get through the day unharmed, unnoticed.

She hurried through the double doors in the main entrance hall and made for her locker, a tall metal sanctuary among hundreds where she could hide a little of herself from prying eyes. She'd gotten lucky during allocations at the start of term. Her locker was close to the girls' bathroom on the ground floor. The surrounding air was a perfume battlefield, but that was way better than the foul stench of stale farts and despair outside the boys' bathroom. Alex spun the dial

on her locker through its combination and pulled open the door. She dumped her things, pulled out a biology textbook and checked her spiky hair in the tiny mirror a previous student had glued inside the door.

"What do you mean, you haven't got it?" a voice demanded.

One of the geeks, a brown-haired kid in glasses and a checked shirt, was under attack from Joey Johnston. Despite having only been a student here a few weeks, Alex already knew the names and faces of the resident bullies. It was another defense mechanism to keep her out of trouble. She also recognized the victim. He was in her class and always smiled at Alex when they bumped each other in the hallways, but she didn't know his name. Johnston was pushing the kid along the corridor toward her. The other students were backing away, hugging the walls to avoid getting involved. Johnston was being backed-up by his goon squad, three thugs that would be more dangerous if they had a brain cell between them.

"I forgot," the geek said, looking around for help that would never come.

"You forgot? That's not good enough, O'Mahoney!" Johnston drew back a fist, ready to strike, but then the second bell rang through the halls, warning students they had less than a minute to reach their classes. Johnston unclenched his fist, gently slapping his victim on the side of the face instead. "Saved by the bell, you little shit. You've got till recess to finish my assignment, or else. Meet me under the bleachers, O'Mahoney, and don't make me come looking for you, that'll only make matters worse. Got it?"

The other kid nodded meekly. Around him the rest of the students were already scurrying to their classes, the prospect of a fight having evaporated. O'Mahoney turned to go, but Johnston shoved out a leg, sending the geek sprawling again. The bully and his cronies swaggered away, laughing amongst themselves. Once they were gone, Alex noticed a pair of glasses beside her. She picked them up and offered them to O'Mahoney. "Are these yours?"

He squinted at her before nodding. Retrieving the glasses, he put them on and smiled at Alex, embarrassment reddening his face. "Thanks. My name's Peter. Peter O'Mahoney"

"Yeah, well, whatever." Alex twisted the dial on her locker, securing the door again. Time she was in class. Don't get involved, just get through the day.

"You're in my class, aren't you?"

"If you say so." Alex gathered her text books under one arm and strode away. Peter hurried after her, talking excitedly.

"Johnston and those guys, they expect me to do their homework." Alex ignored him, increasing the speed of her footsteps, but Peter kept pace. "The sooner I can graduate and get out of this zoo, the better, know what I mean?"

Alex stopped and glared at Peter. "All I did was hand back your glasses, okay? I don't care about you, your life or your problems. Get the message?"

He looked at her, a hurt expression in his eyes. "I understand."

"Good!" Alex pushed past him and into class, leaving Peter alone in the empty hallway. She was ashamed of herself, but it had to be done.

***

Principal Shaye wondered why he bothered sometimes. He had become a teacher because he wanted to help the next generation achieve all they could. He had become a principal with reluctance, however, knowing it would take him away from real teaching, but he still believed that it was a good way of making a difference. Five years in charge of Springwood High was testing that belief.

The students were no worse here than in any other high school. No, there was something else, a dark secret buried in the past of this town. The streets might be clean and tidy, the houses and gardens well kept, the lawns all neatly enclosed by white picket fences, but none of that could disguise the divide between the generations, a palpable sense of alienation between parents and their children. This was not the usual generation gap separating teenagers from their parents. This was something more sinister, more disturbing.

A herd mentality, a mass hysteria had once gripped this place, turning decent, respectable adults into killers. A murdering child

molester had escaped justice on a technicality, so the parents of this quiet Ohio town had taken matters into their own hands, burning him alive and rejoicing in their vengeance. Shaye had been shocked when he learned about the incident, even though it had happened years ago. The legacy of that night was like a stain on the collective psyche of the community, imperceptible, but still ever-present. The details of what happened had been hushed up, with no adult daring to speak the dead man's name. He had become a bogeyman, a metaphor for the divide where civilization gives way to savagery. Springwood had stepped over that line, and its children instinctively knew that. They did not trust their parents, but they couldn't explain why. They didn't know the reason and it had to stay that way.

Principal Shaye took off his round-framed glasses and ran both hands through his greying, collar-length curls. My hair was black before I came here, he thought bleakly. I'll be lucky to have any left by the time I retire. He put his glasses back on and opened the office door. Outside, a line of students was waiting to see him, each reporting for punishment or counseling. Every day the line seemed longer. This place will be the death of me, Shaye decided. He arranged a smile on his careworn features.

"Well, who's first for the firing squad today?" he asked, trying to keep his voice cheerful and upbeat. His secretary, Grace, sat behind her desk in the waiting room entering the day's attendance register into the school computer system. She pointed the end of a pencil at the first person in the waiting line.

"Miss Sutherland. She drove into your personal parking space without noticing you had already left your car there."

An apologetic Heather stood outside Shaye's office, a Band-Aid partly covering a cut on her forehead. "Sorry," she winced.

Shaye nodded wearily and motioned for her to go inside. "Grace, could you find the number for my insurance agent? I haven't seen the damage to my car yet, but I suspect I'm going to need his help."

***

Alex had surprised herself by staying awake through biology—never her favorite subject—but an hour of history devoted entirely to the achievements of Ohio's most important people soon had her eyelids at half mast. There was only so much excitement she could muster for a lecture about the state's eight presidents. It concluded with the less than scintillating life story of Warren Gamaliel Harding, inventor of the "front porch" campaigning style. Yawn central. Alex still wasn't sure what to make of last night's bizarre dream, but one thing was certain, it had left her completely exhausted, and Springwood's local history expert and ageing spinster, Miss Staines, was not helping her stay awake.

It was a blessed relief when the bell rang for the end of class. But Alex's happiness was short-lived once she checked her schedule for the last period before recess: English with Mr Mycroft, the dullest man in town. She dragged herself into his stuffy room and took a seat near the open windows, hoping a few faint breezes might drift into the stifling atmosphere and keep her awake. The boredom was thicker than the dust on the bookshelves lining the back wall. Mr Mycroft was a confirmed bachelor, but of the old school kind. He wasn't gay, he was simply more interested in books and literature than sex. No wonder he's never gotten married, Alex thought, studying his drab choice of clothing. He was clad in a tweed jacket with suede patches at the elbows, a bow tie, and suspenders holding up his green corduroy pants. Mr Mycroft's passion was reserved for poetry, the work of Shelley a particular favorite. He selected a volume of verse and invited Johnston forward to read it aloud, eliciting a collective groan of despair from the other students.

"That will do," Mr Mycroft scolded them, the graying hair scraped over his bald scalp flapping slightly with the breeze coming in from the windows. "Poetry enriches the soul and inspires the mind. Now, Mr Johnston, if you would be so kind. Let us start with the poem 'Adonais' for our young audience."

Joey smirked and began reading, his droning voice crushing all hope of Alex staying awake for much longer. "He hath awakened from the dream of life—'tis we, who lost in stormy vision, keep with phantoms on unprofitable strife..." Alex felt her limbs growing

heavier, her head slumping forward onto the desk, her eyelids drooping down until no light could pass them. Joey's voice continued in the background, but was becoming ever more distant. "And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife, invulnerable nothings..."

"Miss Corwin!"

Alex sat bolt upright, shocked awake by Mr Mycroft's shout. The other students surrounding her were laughing, several pointing at her.

"S-sorry," she stammered quickly. "I only closed my eyes for a moment."

The English teacher shook his head sadly. "I weep for the future if you pupils are a representative sample of the generation to come. Where are the great minds, the thinkers, the poets, the bringers of wonder? Not to be found here, I fear. Literature has little hope of surviving the twenty-first century."

"Sorry," Alex repeated. Johnston had returned to his seat and Mr Mycroft was writing something on the blackboard.

"It's not good enough, not good enough at all. Since this class seems incapable of appreciating the words of Shelley, I shall have to try something a little less demanding. I want all of you to copy down this nursery rhyme a hundred times. Perhaps then you will pay more attention to great writing!"

Alex winced in pain as a textbook struck her in the head, knocking her pen and papers to the floor. She turned to see Johnston giving her the finger. "Thanks a lot, bitch. I'll deal with you later."

Mr Mycroft finished writing the nursery rhyme on the blackboard and stepped away so all the students could read it. "Well, start copying!" he shouted.

Alex retrieved her pen from the floor and began copying the rhyme into her notebook, silently mouthing the words as she wrote. "One, two, Freddy's coming for you; three, four, better lock your door. Five, six, grab a crucifix; Seven, eight, gonna stay up late. Nine, ten, never sleep... again." She sat back and read the words over again. Weird. This was no nursery rhyme she'd ever heard before. Alex considered asking Mr Mycroft about its origins, but decided against it. I've already gotten the class in trouble, don't ask for any more attention.

She started copying the rhyme for a second time, but an ear-piercing sound cut through the air. It set her teeth on edge and seemed to have the same effect on the rest of the class. All the other students were covering their ears, trying to block out the noise, their face filled with pain. Alex did not have to search far for the source.

Mr Mycroft was standing with his back to the class, dragging his hands up and down the blackboard. "This'll teach you to appreciate poetry more, you little shits!" he shouted, but the voice wasn't that of Mr Mycroft anymore, it was deeper, gravelly, almost distorted. His jacket wasn't a jacket anymore either, it was a sweater of dirty red and green stripes. He looked back over his shoulder and Alex felt a scream die in her throat. It was *him*, the creature from her dream, and the sound was coming from his fingerknives scraping across the blackboard.

He twisted around to face the class, holding the four blades to his face. Several students screamed in horror as he ripped the blades downwards, slicing the skin from his features. "Everybody repeat after me," he commanded. "One, two, Freddy's coming for you..."

Nobody spoke.

"Say it!"

"O-one, t-two, F-Freddy's c-coming for y-you..." a few of the students said.

"That's not good enough," he replied and lashed out, swiping his razors through the neck of the nearest girl. She collapsed to the floor, hands flapping helplessly as blood spurted from her wounds, spraying other students like a crimson aerosol. "Say it!"

More of the students joined in, then more. Soon everybody in the class was chanting the rhyme—everyone but Alex. She couldn't speak, couldn't do anything. Outside the window she could see other pupils relaxing on the glass, strolling across the grounds, chatting happily with each other. None of them noticed the horrors happening inside the classroom.

Alex turned back to find the monster standing over her, blood dripping from the four blades on his right hand. The rest of the students were gathered behind him, their faces a snarling mass of fury as they repeated the first line of the rhyme, chanting it over and

over and over. "One, two, Freddy's coming for you. One, two, Freddy's coming for you! One, two, Freddy's coming for you."

His good hand lifted Alex up by the throat and out of the chair, holding her so high her feet were kicking in the air. The gloved hand with its gleaming, bloodied finger-knives was drawn back, poised to slash at her face. He licked his lips and leered at her. "Say it, bitch. Say my name. Tell me how much you want me. Tell me."

Alex found her voice at last. If she was going to die, she wasn't going to let this creep have the satisfaction of breaking her first. She screamed as loud as she could: "Fuck you!"

***

"Miss Corwin! I don't believe that's the sort of language you should be using at this school, let alone in my class."

Alex sat up with a start to find Mr Mycroft standing over her, a look of shock and disappointment on his face. Behind him the rest of the class was laughing, her obscene outburst a welcome relief from the usual tedium of Mr Mycroft's lessons. Inside her notebook she could see the nursery rhyme from her dream, scrawled in her own handwriting, Alex looked at the blackboard, but the only text on it was the extract from Shelley's poem Johnston had been reading.

"I'm sorry," she said, shrugging. "I must have been having a daydream."

The teacher frowned at her. "Daydream or not, that's no excuse for resorting to foul-mouthed epithets. Nor should you be sleeping in my class."

"I'm sorry," Alex repeated. "I didn't get much sleep last night."

"I have no interest in your extra-curricular activities, Miss Corwin, in or out of the bedroom." That brought another howl of laughter from the other students. "I simply wish you to stay awake during my lessons." He returned to the front of the class and tried to bring it to order. "Well, now that you've all had a good laugh, let's move on to discuss the next stanza of this important—"

The bell for recess cut him off. Students were already bolting for the classroom door, leaving Mr Mycroft shouting after them.

"Tomorrow I want all of you to have read this poem and prepared an analysis of its rhyme structure." Nobody was listening, nobody cared. It was time for food and fun, and mingling with the rest of the school. Contemplating Shelley was no substitute for real life.

Alex was last to leave, not wanting to see any of her classmates for a while. Her embarrassment would soon be forgotten, replaced by some other, more recent incident. For now, she wanted to climb into a hole and vanish. Alex paused by the blackboard where Mr Mycroft was wiping away the verse he had written earlier. She showed him the nursery rhyme inside her notebook. "Excuse me, Mr Mycroft, but do you recognize these words?"

He glanced at the writing. Within moments the color was draining from his face. "Where did you get that from?"

"I don't know," Alex admitted. "Is it important?"

The teacher shook his head, a strange look crossing his features. "No. I think it's a local rhyme, something from days gone by. Nobody uses that anymore. I suggest you forget all about it."

"Oh," Alex said, mystified by his reaction.

Mr Mycroft hurriedly gathered his things and began pushing her out of the room. "If you'll excuse me, I have to lock the class during recess—school regulations. Cuts down on vandalism."

Alex let herself be shoved out into the hall. The elderly teacher locked the door behind him then strode toward the staff room, muttering under his breath. Alex could have sworn she saw his hands shaking as he left.

THREE

Chris was running laps around the baseball diamond when he heard a strangled cry for help. Beneath the bleachers a heavyset figure was looming over another person cowering in the shadows. "Ain't nobody gonna help you now, you little shit." The surly voice was unmistakably Joey Johnston. Chris had crossed paths with him before and decided the bully had more muscles than brains.

"Please, I need more time."

"I ain't got time. I needed those answers today." The sound of fist on flesh was followed by a cry of pain.

Chris stopped running. He shouldn't get involved and should keep going, but he couldn't. Johnston used intimidation to get what he wanted from other students. Those he couldn't frighten he avoided, like Chris, but most were easy pickings. Johnston was in no danger of graduating anytime soon, but he had enough animal cunning to do his dirty work out of the faculty's sight. Normally he had three loyal goons to help enforce his regime, but they must be busy elsewhere. Johnston was flying solo for once. Good, Chris decided. He needs to be taught a lesson.

Chris jogged round the bleachers and approached the two students. Johnston's latest victim was on the ground, blood streaming from both nostrils, hands groping across the dirt in search of something. Chris recalled seeing the kid in class, but couldn't remember his name; was it Paul? Patrick? Johnston was enjoying himself, a cruel smile on his fleshy face that was framed by blond hair shaved close to the scalp. He was about to crush the other kid's glasses beneath his boots. "This is what happens when you disappoint me, Peter."

"Hey!" Chris shouted, startling Johnston. "Leave him alone."

The thug sneered at the new arrival. "You gonna make me, boy?"

Chris felt his anger rising at the implied racial slur. "I ain't your boy and I ain't your friend, Johnston. Leave him be."

"You gonna make me?"

"If I have to, yes."

Johnston smiled cockily. "You and whose army?"

"I don't need an army for the likes of you. One on one. Let's see how big a man you are without three goons to back you up."

Johnston's eyes narrowed. "You get in a fight, what's that gonna do to your chances of playing in the big game... *boy*? Coach'll drop you like a stone if he thinks you're a discipline case."

Chris knew Johnston was right, but stood his ground. "Bring it on, if you think you can take me single-handed."

"Hey! What's going on under there?" Coach was marching towards the bleachers. He might be pushing fifty, but Springwood High's head of sports was all muscle and grit, the sun gleaming on his bald, bronzed head. "Harris, I said I wanted eighty laps from you. I don't see you running!"

Johnston smiled. "Speak of the devil." He noticed Peter trying to retrieve his glasses. Johnston slammed his boot down, crushing them underfoot, all the while smirking at Chris standing opposite. "Go on, take a swing at me now, *boy*. Show me what you've got."

Chris stepped toward him. "Later, when we don't have an audience."

Peter had found the shattered frames. "You broke my glasses."

Johnston laughed. "Poor baby. Maybe we can get you a seeing-eye dog."

Peter punched his right hand into Johnston's crotch. The bully crumpled to the ground, a strangulated cry gasping from his lips. Peter leaned over the whimpering figure. "Maybe we should get you a seeing-eye dick, asshole!"

"Hey! What the hell is going on here?" Coach demanded. He came round the back of the bleachers in time to see Johnston attacked, but missed what provoked the incident. Peter briefly explained what had occurred and Chris backed him up. Coach crouched beside Johnston who was still recovering in the dirt. "Well, is that what happened?"

"Harris's lying, Coach. I was helping Peter find his glasses, but I accidentally stood on them. Harris goaded Peter into hitting me."

Chris tried to protest, but Coach had heard enough. "Fighting among students is not acceptable behavior at Springwood High,

unless it's inside a boxing ring. O'Mahoney, I'm putting you down for detention."

"But what about my glasses?"

"Johnston here will buy you a new pair, won't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, can you stand, Johnston? We better get you to the infirmary, see if there's another hurt worse than your pride."

"I can make it on my own two feet," Johnston announced.

"Alright, then get going," Coach replied. "I want to talk to Harris."

Johnston nodded. As he walked past Chris, the blond youth hissed quietly out the side of his mouth. "I'll deal with you later... nigger."

Chris lashed out, smashing a fist into Johnston's face. The nose broke with an audible crack and Johnston collapsed to the dirt once more, crying out in agony. Coach jumped between the two teenagers to stop Chris continuing his attack. "That's enough! Harris, go to my office!"

"But he called me—"

"I don't care what he called you, there is no justification for that sort of behavior in my school."

"But he—"

"I said go to my office. Now." Chris unclenched his fists, but his face was still full of rage. Johnston blew him a kiss from behind Coach's back. Chris swore under his breath before stomping away, furious about letting Johnston get the better of him. Coach waved Peter away. "You get out of here too, O'Mahoney. You're in enough trouble as it is."

Peter collected the remains of his glasses and then hurried after Chris, squinting to avoid running into the bleachers' support beams. "Hey, wait up!"

"I can't," Chris snarled. "You heard what Coach said."

"Yeah, but I wanted to thank you—"

"For what?" Chris demanded.

"Stepping in, helping me with Johnston. Most people are afraid of him, but you weren't. You—"

"I just got myself thrown off the basketball team for helping you," Chris cut in. "I can kiss goodbye to my college scholarship too, all

because I decided to do a good deed. I should have known better, for chrissakes!"

Peter stopped following Chris. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize..."

"Lot of good that's gonna do me!" Chris marched on, determined not to let Peter see the tears of anger and frustration welling up in his eyes. "Just stay the hell away from me, you got that?"

Peter nodded sadly. "Yeah, I got it."

***

Detention at Springwood High was a common occurrence for some students, and an unpleasant new experience for others. Once classes were dismissed for the day anyone given detention was expected to report to the library within twenty minutes. The rules were simple: no talking, no movement, no cellular phones or electronic devices, no books, no pens, no pencils, no paper and no sleeping. Students had to sit in the center of the library and do nothing for two hours. The purpose was to make the punishment so boring that the students would make sure they would never have to attend detention again. For the most part, this policy succeeded. But for serial offenders like Lloyd Reeves, detention wasn't a waste of time, it was a valuable business opportunity to connect with new customers.

Lloyd had been held back twice in junior high, thanks to an early introduction to regular drug consumption. Most of his contemporaries only sampled the demon weed upon arriving at Springwood High. Lloyd became a blowmonkey at the age of ten, after stealing a joint from his elder brother Beau's secret stash. Lloyd thought it was a normal cigarette until he starting to inhale. Within a few minutes the GI Joe soldiers on the wallpaper in his bedroom came to life and were parading around the bed. After that little episode, Lloyd spent the next three years bugging Beau for another sample of nature's finest. He tried most other drugs—magic mushrooms were another big hit, if you could pick them without being caught by the pigs—but grass was still his favorite. Something about the whole ritual of rolling the joint, getting those babies good

and tight so they burned just right... Man, it was an art form. If they gave him a grade for that, Lloyd would have graduated years ago.

Obviously, it had been a bummer when Beau got caught trying to sell a quarter ounce to an undercover cop. Beau's plea that he was looking after the weed for a friend, man, had cut little ice with the presiding judge at his trial. But there was an upside for Lloyd, who liked to think of himself as a guy who thought the glass half full kind of a dude. The harsh sentence left Lloyd to look after the crop growing in their grandparent's basement. Beau had built a homemade hydroponics growing operation, complete with computer-controlled nutrient flows and ultraviolet lights to keep the plants growing good and strong.

Explaining to his grandparents about all the tinfoil covering the windows and doors hadn't been easy until Lloyd had a brainwave. "It's a science project, gramps. Yeah, I'm, like, growing these for school. It's awesome. Once they're just right, I harvest the err... results and present them to my fellow students. We all get to benefit from the, like, wonders of modern technology. I wouldn't be surprised if I ace science as a result. Maybe business studies too."

Lloyd was rather too fond of sampling the merchandise, but that didn't stop him turning a profit from dealing Springwood's finest weed. No matter what the weather, Lloyd always wore a big knitted cap to school. Challenged to explain his headgear by his peers, Lloyd had been blessed with another of his brainwaves. Inspired by the life and music of Bob Marley, that hero to potheads everywhere, Lloyd announced he had converted to the Rastafarian religion and would be growing his hair into dreadlocks. Hey, it saved him having to wash his shoulder-length mop of sandy brown hair, and meant nobody wanted to look inside his hat. Genius, man, totally genius.

When the final bell of the day announced it was time to go home, Lloyd grinned like an idiot. Excellent. Wander along to the library, set up shop and Lloyd Reeves' Emporium of Dubious Delights was open for business. What was today? Thursday? Even better. No detention on Friday, so this was the last chance for students to pick up a little something for the weekend. Lloyd shuffled out of his last

class of the day, the frayed ends of his flared jeans dragging along the floor behind him. Time to spread a little happiness.

***

Alex made sure she was first at the library. It was a large, open plan space split over two floors at the northern end of the school. The ground floor held all the fiction, reference volumes, catalogues and library administration. This was grouped round the outer walls, leaving the central area free for tables and chairs where students could sit and read. Above this was a vast tinted glass ceiling, allowing natural light to spill in without damaging the books.

The upper level was reserved for office space, non-fiction and computers for surfing the net. The terminals were to be used solely as reference tools, but most students found a way to override the censorship firewalls. Twice, Principal Shaye had threatened to remove the computers altogether, unless irresponsible elements among the student population stopped downloading and installing pornographic screensavers. But everyone knew the school was required by state legislation to have computers available, so his threat carried little weight.

Alex pushed open the double doors and wandered into the library. The familiar smells and sensations washed over her: dust, despair and boredom. A lack of ventilation preserved the dry and stuffy atmosphere, underlining the fact this was a place for learning, not for fun. Anyone who still had delusions about its purpose need only meet the chief librarian, Mrs Mortimer. A rotund, humorless woman in her fifties, she treated the library as her domain and everyone who ventured inside as a troublemaker intent on disrupting her schedule. The library would run so much more smoothly and efficiently if nobody ever tried to borrow a book.

Alex realized by the look on the middle-aged woman's face that the decision to hold detention in the library did not particularly please Mrs Mortimer. Slab-faced and sour of looks, she was stomping about the central area brusquely pushing chairs back into their appointed

positions. Mrs Mortimer noticed Alex's arrival and scowled. "I suppose you're here for detention?"

"Well, I didn't come to take out a book," Alex replied, trying to raise a smile. It was a wasted effort since Mrs Mortimer took the comment seriously.

"I should hope not! This facility is closed to students after hours unless they have a written exemption from the principal."

"Right." Alex gestured towards the cluster of tables and chairs. "Where do you want me to sit?"

"I don't *want* you to sit anywhere," Mrs Mortimer snapped imperiously. "I would much prefer it if none of your kind ever darkened the door of my library again. But since you are here first, you may choose whichever seat you want."

Alex decided on the chair furthest from the old battleaxe and collapsed into it, dropping her bag on the table in front of her.

"Bags on the floor, please!"

Alex shifted her bag before smiling insincerely at Mrs Mortimer.

"That's better. The other reprobates should be along presently, then I shall explain the rules."

"I've been in detention before, you know."

"That matters little to me. Once you are all assembled, I shall explain the rules. That is the required procedure, so that is what shall happen."

"No skin off my chin," Alex muttered.

Before the librarian could react, the double doors into the library swung open and Lloyd shuffled in, his jeans dragging across the carpet tile flooring. "Hey, Mrs M, how you doin?"

"My name is Mrs Mortimer, Reeves, not Mrs M or any variant upon that."

"Whatever you say, Mrs M, whatever you say. I'm, like, totally not here to cause any trouble. You're the boss."

The librarian rolled her eyes and pointed at a chair. "Just sit, Reeves."

He shuffled to the seat and sank into it, giving Mrs Mortimer a wink. "Your wish is my command, Mrs M. And hey, call me Lloyd. Everyone does. It's, like, my name and everything."

Peter was next to arrive, hurrying through the doors, out of breath. "Sorry, I was just err... having a discussion with some of the other students."

Heavy steps could be heard and then Johnston and his three cronies burst into the library. A white bandage adorned the bully's face, covering his nose, but not hiding the black bruises developing under both eyes. "You can run but you can't hide, you little—"

"Mr Johnston, are you joining us for detention again today?" Mrs Mortimer cut in.

Johnston let go of Peter's shirt and backed away from the stern-faced librarian. "Mrs Mortimer. I didn't see you there."

"Plainly. Are you joining us?" She waved a hand towards Alex and Lloyd.

Johnston shook his head. "Not today. Maybe next week." He jerked a thumb towards the exit, motioning for his three minions to leave. Johnston spared a last message for Peter. "Hey, O'Mahoney. Catch you later, okay?"

No sooner had he walked out than Kat marched in and took a seat with the others. Chris and Heather were last to arrive, both entering uncertainly. Mrs Mortimer pointed them towards the chairs in the middle of the library then began her list of rules and regulations for the next two hours, a well-rehearsed speech about silence, respect and taking things seriously. Once satisfied they knew what to do in the event of a fire or other emergency, she retired to her office upstairs. The chief librarian paused on the stairs to deliver a final warning.

"If I hear one word out of you or see anything untoward happening down here, all of you will be back for a week's worth of detention from Monday." Mrs Mortimer resumed her journey up the stairs then paused again. "Except for Mr Reeves, who seems to be a permanent fixture here. I'm sure I'll see him again next week, regardless of what happens in the next two hours."

***

The six students watched Mrs Mortimer depart, then sat and waited in silence for several minutes. Chris was first to speak, keeping his voice a whisper. "So what do we do now?"

"Nothing," Kat replied dryly. "That's the whole point. They think if they bore us shitless, we won't want to come back for more. Guess they haven't been to any of Mycroft's classes lately."

"I should be at training," Chris lamented. "My dad's gonna kill me if he finds out I've been in detention."

"Poor baby," Kat teased. "This your first time in with the bad boys and girls? What did you do? Forget to bring Coach an apple before gym class?"

"He punched Johnston in the face," Peter replied. "Broke his nose, too."

"Dude! Way to go," Lloyd said approvingly.

"I hit Johnston in the nuts," Peter added, but the others ignored him.

"He provoked me," Chris explained. "I'm not proud of what I did."

"You should be," Heather chipped in. "Johnston's been an asshole for years. It's about time somebody wiped that smug grin off his face."

Kat folded her arms and glared at Heather. "Who let the princess in here? What did you do, wear the wrong nail polish to a pep rally?"

"I had an accident," Heather snapped. "It's none of your business."

"She totaled Principal Shaye's car," Lloyd announced. "Smashed it right up the ass. You should have seen the look on the Shaye-man's face!"

"It was an accident," Heather maintained before turning on Kat. "What the hell are you in here for anyway?"

"I'm not here for detention," Kat admitted. "I came to get my supplies for the weekend." She extracted the stolen money from her rucksack and threw the crumpled notes to Lloyd.

"Now that's what I'm talking about," he said happily. After counting the cash, Lloyd removed his hat and extracted three baggies filled with dried greenery.

"I always wondered what you kept under there," Peter said.

Lloyd smirked before tossing the bags across the table to Kat. "Don't smoke it all at once." She smiled and nodded.

Chris was horrified. "You came to detention to do a drug deal?"

"What, you think I'd come here otherwise?" Kat asked. "I don't know how you can play at all with that stick up your butt, Harris. Relax, you'll live longer."

"Only losers do drugs," Chris replied.

Lloyd paused before putting his hat back on. "Anybody else want to join us losers, or should I close the store for today?"

Peter smiled triumphantly. "It's in Johnson's underpants!"

Everybody looked at him quizzically. "The dope, it's in Johnson's underpants!" he repeated.

"Dude, I thought I was bad," Lloyd commented, "but you're way further out there than me..."

Peter shook his head. "No, no, I've just remembered what this is like. Remember the scene in that film, the one where they're all in detention and smoking dope in the library? Where they do the goofy dancing?"

Silence.

"It's a John Hughes film—an Eighties teen classic," Peter persisted. "A jock, a prom queen, a geek, a weirdo and a troublemaker, all thrown together for the day in one place. Molly Ringwald, Emilio Estevez, Judd Nelson and Anthony Michael Hall; you must have seen it! Came out in 1985."

Lloyd broke the silence that followed. "Dude, we weren't even born in 1985."

"Anthony Michael Hall, isn't he the guy who sees visions on that TV show?" Heather asked. "Creepy!"

"Forget him," Kat said before pointing at Alex. "I want to hear from Little Miss Quiet over there. She hasn't said a thing since we arrived."

"You must have cut English this morning," Lloyd said. "She totally freaked in Mycroft's class, started shouting about how she wanted to fuck somebody."

"That wasn't what I said," Alex replied.

Lloyd shrugged. "That's what it sounded like to me. It was intense. Really."

"Freddy, his name was Freddy. And I didn't want to fuck him, I was shouting 'Fuck you!' at him, okay?"

"Hey, I'm not arguing, I'm only trying to do a little business."

Kat wasn't finished with Alex yet. "I still want to know why you're here. What did you do to get sent to detention?"

Alex grimaced, embarrassed to admit the truth. "Nothing."

"Nothing? Nobody gets stuck here with that old bitch Mortimer for doing nothing, not even me," Kat said.

"I'm not in detention," Alex admitted. "I just didn't want to go home."

None of them spoke for a moment.

"I can understand that," Peter murmured. A few of the others exchanged knowing glances. Only Lloyd had something more to say.

"Man, you are bringing me down! People need cheering up, know what I'm saying?" He smiled. "I know just the thing to cure your ills, dudes."

"I told you before, I don't do drugs," Chris replied.

"Better than that," Lloyd said. "How about a totally awesome field trip?"

"What are you talking about?" Heather asked.

"One of my brother's best buds, Luke, scored this gig working on clinical drug trials at the Katja Institute for the Study of Sleep Disorders. You check in for the day, they stick a needle in your arm and you check out with a pocket full of dead presidents. Its, like, the best deal ever, you know?"

"What kind of drugs?" Peter wondered.

"Luke says the latest batch is a new kind of anti-insomnia serum. Best sleep I have had in years. Just, like, awesome," Lloyd enthused.

"You've already done this?"

"Yeah, last Friday. I ditched classes and got paid for sleeping all day. And the dreams I had, duuude, better than any weed I've ever toked, know what I mean?"

Kat nodded. "I'm up for that. When's the next session?"

"Tomorrow. Registration's at, like, ten in the morning."

"I'll see you there," Kat agreed. "Who else is coming? Princess?"

Heather looked doubtful. "I don't know... What about side effects?"

Lloyd smiled broadly. "It's totally safe, you know? They couldn't test it on humans unless it was."

"I could use the money to get my car fixed," Heather realized. After a moment's thought she grinned. "I'm in."

"Excellent!" Lloyd nodded happily. "Anybody else? Basketball dude?"

"The name's Chris. And I told you, I don't do drugs."

"This juice is strictly legit, man, nothing to worry yourself about!"

"Still..." Chris shook his head. "I don't think this is for me."

Peter rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I've always wanted to see a clinical trial in action. I'm considering whether or not to go into pharmaceutical research after getting my first degree."

"Alright. We've got four on floor, any more for any more?" Lloyd turned to Alex. "What about you? You look like you could use a good sleep, and getting paid at the same time can't be bad, you know?"

She looked at him suspiciously. "Why are you so enthusiastic about this? You on a commission or something?"

Lloyd shrugged, a little shamefaced. "I'll fess up. Luke gets a bonus for every volunteer he gets through the door, and he's splitting it with me. But that doesn't stop this being a good deal, you know?"

"You'll probably be given a placebo," Peter added. "At many clinical trials only half the volunteers get the real drug. The rest are used as a control sample to compare effectiveness."

"I'll think about it," Alex conceded.

"Excellent," Lloyd enthused. "Trust me, this is the easiest money you'll ever make. Flat on your back and dozing away the day. It's buzz city, dudes!"

FOUR

Alex spent the night tossing and turning, unable to get to sleep. Her brain wouldn't shut up, the last twenty-four hours replaying over and over again in her mind. The nightmare about being back in therapy, that freak and what he wanted to do to her, the weird daydream she'd had in Mr Mycroft's class, the cuts on her arm, the rhyme written into her notebook while she was still dreaming. What did it all mean? Every time she felt sleep closing around her like a shroud, Alex snapped awake again. I don't want another nightmare visit, she decided. Better to stay awake and decide about the drug trial in the morning. At least if she fell asleep there, the doctors would make sure nothing bad happened, right?

It took forever for dawn to come, the night hours crawling past. Alex kept cranking up the volume on her iPod to stop herself from dozing off. At last the alarm clock by her bed sprang into life, announcing it was time to get up. Alex silenced the ringing with a violent slap, and swung her legs out of bed. She felt utterly exhausted and the bathroom mirror didn't help, dark shadows having appeared under her eyes during the night. I'll look like a fucking raccoon if this keeps up, Alex thought ruefully. Getting paid to sleep all day was sounding more attractive by the minute. She turned on the shower, letting her mind wander.

If she did go along for the drug trial, it would be a chance to see Peter again, but outside school. He was a geek, but he was still kind of cute. Get that hair of his sorted out, maybe some better clothes, he might be presentable. Alex stepped under the hot water and shook her head in dismay. What am I thinking about? Don't get involved, and you won't get hurt. Getting the hots for a geek was not going to help things get better for her at school, that's for sure. Alex poured shower gel over her chest, rubbing it into a lather. She started massaging the bubbles across her breasts, the palm of one hand lingering as it brushed back and forth across the nipples. Her other hand spread more gel across her abdomen, the cool liquid dribbling

down between her legs. I wonder what Peter looks like naked, she wondered, her fingers moving backward and forward. Get him out of those dork squad clothes and he might be...

"Alex. Breakfast is ready." The voice from downstairs broke into her thoughts, pushing the warm sensations to one side. Alex smiled. I swear mom must be psychic, she always knows when to spoil my fun.

***

Ten minutes later Alex was downstairs, dressed in jeans and a pale blue, long-sleeved top, her hair still damp from the shower. She munched on a piece of toast, dreading the conversation to come. The door to her room had been open when she got home the previous night so there was little doubt her mom had been snooping again. Normally that wouldn't be a problem, Alex had nothing to hide. But the bloody sink and tissues, the crimson stains on the sheets; *that* was going to take some explaining.

Joyce was sipping a cup of coffee, worry lines evident round her eyes. "Alex, is everything alright?"

"Everything's fine, Mom."

"It's just..." Here it comes. "I went into your room yesterday to change the sheets and... I found one of them in the wastebasket."

"Yeah. I had an accident in the night."

"What kind of accident?"

Alex decided causing embarrassment was her best defense. "A woman's accident, alright Mom? Jesus, I don't want to talk about it."

"I understand," Joyce said. "But I noticed a stain on your mattress as well. It wasn't... down there."

Alex couldn't believe her mom was persisting with this. "I woke up in the night and didn't feel well, alright? So I sat up and that's when it started, okay?"

Joyce didn't look convinced but let it slide. "If you say so, dear..."

Alex rolled her eyes. "I'm outta here." She dumped the remains of her breakfast in the trash, grabbed her bag and headed for the door.

"Alex," Joyce called after her. "You can always talk to me about anything. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah," Alex replied, already halfway gone. "See you later."

"Have a nice day, dear." Joyce called after her.

Alex kept walking, not looking back. That's it, no way am I going to school, she decided. I've had enough embarrassment and humiliation for one day. Lloyd just got himself another cut of Luke's commission.

***

The Katja Institute was an angular building of concrete and glass, architecturally daring in its day. But more than thirty years had passed since then, and now it displayed the blocky, brutal look that screamed early seventies. Moisture had stained the walls, while dark, tinted glass gave its exterior a sinister look. Chris was contemplating the institute from the parking lot. He had ambitions of becoming an architect, but his father was intent on pushing Chris into sports. Make your fortune before thirty then do what you like with the rest of your life. But thirty was so far in the future, it might as well be three hundred. The sound of a car horn announced Heather's arrival in her battered convertible. She waved to the tall teenager.

"Hey, you decided to come after all!" she said happily. "I was worried it was going to be just me and the stoners. What changed your mind?"

Chris shrugged. "Had another argument with my dad when he found out I was in detention for fighting. You think he'd be on my side, but no, he tells me to 'turn the other cheek' and all that shit."

"So you decided to stage a little rebellion of your own?"

"Something like that." Chris examined the crumpled front of Heather's car. "I see why you need the money. You can have half of my fee, if it'll help."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm not doing this for the cash."

"That's so sweet of you," Heather smiled and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thank you."

They were soon joined by the others, Lloyd arriving last, shuffling along in a world of his own.

"Hey, dudes. Glad you could make it," he said, nodding his approval.

"Let's get inside," Kat suggested. "I didn't come here to spend my morning in the parking lot, Lloyd."

"Take a chill pill, illustrated lady," he replied. "I'll groove on in and find my bud Luke, make sure we're good to go, okay?"

Peter watched the dope-addled Lloyd saunter inside. "You gotta wonder if he got dropped on his head as a baby."

Alex looked nervous about what lay ahead. "Don't you have to be twenty-one or something to take part in a drug trial?"

"Not necessarily," Peter said. "Minimum age ranges for adult studies vary from state to state. I looked it up on the net last night. The lower limit is sixteen in Ohio."

"The nights must be one long party at your place," Kat commented.

Chris saw Lloyd emerge and offer them two thumbs up. "Looks like we're on. Anybody wants out, now's the time to leave." Kat was already marching towards the entrance. Heather shrugged and followed, Peter tagging along behind. Chris turned to Alex. "What about you?"

"I guess... I'm going in," she said eventually.

He smiled at her. "Then let's go."

***

Once inside the six students were ushered to a waiting area, a quiet space with lime green sofas, brown carpet and air fresheners placed on every surface. Each was given a fistful of forms to fill in, detailing their family's medical history, sleeping habits and recollections of any recent dreams. Alex bit her bottom lip, uncertain what to write. "I've been having some pretty intense nightmares lately. Should I put those down?" she asked. Lloyd shook his head.

"That whole section is, like, optional anyway. Put the usual stuff."

"The usual stuff?" Peter looked at his replies on the forms. "All of it?" Lloyd smirked. "Luke says they get people writing some pretty

weird shit on these forms. You know, kinky sex dreams and stuff. You wouldn't believe some of the things he's told me about, man. If you want your money, make sure you put twenty-one as your age. Better safe than sorry."

Alex decided to keep her nightmares and daydreams to herself. As for medical history, she recycled the old excuse about a vicious cat to explain the fresh wounds and old scars on her arms.

A pale youth in jeans, T-shirt and a white lab coat appeared in the waiting area, his lapel badge naming him as Luke. "Hey, is everybody all done with their forms?"

Lloyd waved at his friend. "Hey, Luke-ster, how's it hanging, man?"

"To the ground, dude, to the ground." Luke counted the volunteers. "Six of you, good. Alright, if you'll hand back your forms, I'll take you to the testing area."

"What about our money?" Kat asked.

"Straight to business with you, huh?" Luke reached into his pocket and withdrew a clutch of envelopes. He handed one to each of the teenagers, and returned the rest to his pocket. "Inside you'll find a check for three hundred and twenty bucks. Write in your name as the payee and bank it whenever you want. Checks should clear within three working days."

"I was expecting cash," Kat said unhappily.

"Well, you can't always get what you want," Luke replied.

"But you get what you need," Lloyd chimed in. "Excellent Stones reference, dude! Now that was a Class-A album, man."

"Whatever," Heather interrupted. "Can we get on with this? I have to take my car to the garage later and they close at five tonight."

"If you'll all follow me," Luke said and led them along a corridor to the far end of the building. He opened a door bearing a plaque: Morpheus Pharmaceuticals-Consulting Physicians GF Deuer, D Kerry. "This is where the tests will be run. We've already got cots set up for you."

Beyond the door was a rectangular room with four hospital beds on either side. Gentle overhead lights illuminated the space, while venetian blinds masked the windows set into one wall. A long mirror

was mounted on the opposite wall, stretching sideways above the beds. Airconditioning maintained a quiet hum in the background, while the ever-present scent of air-freshener leaked from the room into the corridor.

"We don't have to get undressed, do we?" Peter asked nervously.

Luke laughed. "No, you stay in your street clothes, but we would ask you to remove shoes and any sharp or valuable objects, such as watches or jewelry. Put them in the lockers by your beds and you'll get them back once the test is concluded." He consulted his wristwatch. "Okay, Doctors Deuer and Kerry will be along to see you soon to explain the procedure to you guys. Why don't you go in and make yourselves comfortable? I'll tell them you're ready."

The six students wandered into the room, choosing their beds and following Luke's instructions. Alex opted for a cot beneath the mirror, so she was facing the windows. Peter took the bed on her right, nearest the door, while Kat was on her left. Heather, Chris and Lloyd divided the beds beneath the windows between them, Lloyd choosing the one near the door.

Within a few minutes, two gray-haired men in white lab coats entered, introducing themselves as Doctors Deuer and Kerry. Deuer was portly and round-faced, while his associate cut a taller, more patrician figure. Kerry did most of the talking as Deuer moved among the teenagers, attaching monitoring devices to their hands, foreheads and chests. He also checked the veins in their arms, tapping the inside of their right elbows.

"My colleague is checking that we'll have no problems finding a suitable vein for the injection," Kerry explained. "He is also ensuring none of you are intravenous drug users. The substance under trial here is an anti-insomnia serum, and previous tests have shown it can cause side effects among heavy drug users. Now, we have your full medical histories. Does anybody have anything they wish to add or ask before we begin the trial?" Peter raised his hand, bringing a smile from Kerry. "You don't have to do that, son. Just ask your question."

"Oh, okay. What can we expect to happen?"

"A good question. You will each receive an injection. Half of you will be injected with a harmless liquid placebo that should have no

effect. The other half will receive the serum and should fall into a deep, restful slumber. Previous volunteers have reported some vivid dreams while asleep, but none have experienced any distress during those dreams. Once everybody has been injected, we will lower the lights in here and leave you to drift off. In five hours time Dr Deuer and I will return to wake you. After that we'll have some questions for you to answer verbally, and another form to fill in. The whole process should be completed by four this afternoon and then you'll be free to go. Any more questions?" The silence in the room seemed to satisfy Kerry. He smiled at them benevolently. "You know, I grew up in Springwood. This is my hometown. It's changed a lot since my day, of course..."

Deuer smiled at his colleague, indicating everything was ready. Kerry nodded. "Well, enough small talk. It only remains for us to wish you all a good afternoon's sleep. We will return in a few hours to see how you're doing." The two doctors departed, leaving the teenagers alone.

"Morpheus Pharmaceuticals," Peter said when the doctors had gone. "I web searched all the major US drug developers, but couldn't find Morpheus."

"Stop worrying, man," Lloyd replied. "Luke told me it's a new company. What I want to know is, why name it after that black dude from *The Matrix?"*

"Morpheus was the Greek god of sleep and dreams," Alex said. Her dad used to read to her from a book of myths and legends when she was a child to help her get to sleep. She could still remember every detail from the cover of that book, but she couldn't remember what her dad's face looked like anymore. Maybe I'll see him in my dream—if I get the drug and not the placebo.

"Cool," Lloyd decided. Footsteps became audible, along with a curious noise like a mechanical mouse. "Alright, everybody, here comes the juice!"

The door opened and Luke appeared, pushing a trolley with a squeaky wheel. On its gleaming metal surface sat six kidney-shaped bowls, each containing a syringe. Beside them was another bowl filled with cotton balls, along with a bottle of rubbing alcohol and a

box of Band-Aids. Luke stopped and smiled at the volunteers. "Who wants to be first?"

"Bring it on, dude," Lloyd urged and was rewarded with the first jab of a needle. Heather was next, followed by Chris and Kat. When Luke reached Alex, she drew back when she saw how big the syringe was. He noticed her discomfort and grinned.

"Not fond of needles, huh?"

Alex nodded nervously.

"Don't worry, it's just a little prick. You won't feel a thing."

"I bet you say that to all the girls," Lloyd called from across the room.

Alex grimaced as the needle was inserted into her arm, but once the skin was broken, the process was uncomfortable more than painful. Luke emptied the syringe into her and then swiftly withdrew the needle. He swabbed the puncture wound clean and covered it with a Band-Aid. "That'll stop any infection."

Alex broke into a smile. "I thought it would be more painful than that."

Luke shrugged. "Sorry. I'll try to do worse next time, if you like."

She settled back into the pillows on her bed and breathed out. Already there was a faint numbness creeping up her arm, a pleasant warmth spreading out through her. Alex felt as though she was afloat inside her own body, swimming beneath the skin. It would only need a jolt to knock her free. Luke pushed the squeaking trolley round to Peter and administered the final injection. Once the procedure was complete for everybody, he retreated to the doorway.

"I'm going to dim the lights now and leave you in peace. If you do need anything, there's a call switch above each bed. Just hit the button and I'll be here inside thirty seconds, okay? Sweet dreams everybody."

Alex was suddenly sleepy, hardly able to keep her eyes open. She didn't notice Luke leave as much as she *felt* him leave after dimming the lights. Guess I didn't get the placebo, she thought to herself. As darkness overtook her, Alex remembered an old TV show the local channel was fond of showing first thing on Sunday mornings. Every episode finished the same way, with all the members of a hillbilly

family retiring to bed. A phrase from the show escaped to her lips. "Goodnight, Mary Ellen," Alex said with a giggle. "Goodnight JimBob." Then she was asleep.

***

Chris woke suddenly. Where the hell am I? This certainly isn't my bedroom. Then he remembered the drug trial, getting the injection, feeling drowsy. Must have nodded off. Sitting up, he could see the others still asleep on their beds. Guess I got the placebo—probably just as well. Coming here seemed like a good idea last night, a little harmless rebellion against his father, but what if the serum contained some sort of steroid? High school athletes were not usually subject to drug testing, but any scouts would probably insist on making sure he was clean before offering him a scholarship.

I wonder how much longer I have to wait before I can get up? Chris decided to find out who else had gotten the placebo. "Hey, Heather! You awake?" he whispered. But the girl in the next bed didn't respond, her breathing remaining deep and steady. Chris tried calling to the other side of the room. "Hey, Alex, you asleep?" Still no response. He raised his voice a little and called out again, but none of the others responded. Weird. I thought half of us were getting the placebo, not just me.

Chris remembered what Luke had said and hit the call switch over his bed. It was probably only meant for emergencies, but being wide awake in bed for the rest of the day sounded boring. Maybe they'd cut him some slack and bring him a magazine or something. Chris waited and waited, but nobody responded. He hit the red button again without success. Screw this. If they won't come to me, I'll go and find them, he decided. Chris swung his feet round and down onto the black and white checked linoleum floor. He stood up and swayed a little, momentarily dizzy. Whoa! Whatever was in that placebo might not be a sleep serum, but it still delivered a kick.

One of the others began murmuring in their sleep. It was Alex, her face a frown of intense concentration. Chris moved closer to hear what she was saying. "Dad, turn around... Look at me... I'm up here...

up here..." She rolled over, punched her pillow and settled down again, her breathing becoming regular once more.

"Sweet dreams?" Chris muttered. "I don't think so..." He walked to the door and peered out through a glass panel. The corridor beyond was dark too, a light at the far end providing the only illumination. Chris opened the door and leaned out. "Is anybody out here? Luke? Doctor Kerry?" There was no reply. Chris glanced back at the others, all of whom seemed fast asleep. He decided to risk raising his voice. "Hey! Is anybody out there? Can anyone hear me? I'm one of the volunteers for Morpheus Pharmaceuticals!" His voice echoed along the corridor, but nobody came, nobody responded.

Chris walked along the hall toward the distant light. His bare feet made a gentle slapping sound on the linoleum floor. I was sure this place had carpet everywhere, Chris thought, his bewilderment growing. Now the floor was covered in red and green stripes: what was that all about? He dismissed the notion. I probably wasn't paying close enough attention before. Chris kept walking toward the light. "Is anybody there?"

***

Lloyd opened his eyes in time to see Chris leaving. Guess I didn't get the serum this time—bummer! I was hoping for a free ride to the land of happy. Lloyd remembered the stash concealed inside his hat and smiled. Guess I'll make my own way there. After checking the others were still asleep, he took off his hat and reached inside. What the fuck? I don't remember leaving this in here.

Lloyd pulled out an enormously fat plastic baggie crammed with dope and cigarette papers. How it all fit inside his hat defied reason. Hey, I'll just consider myself one lucky dude, Lloyd decided, why would I need reason? Jesus, there was enough grass inside the bag to make a joint the size of my arm. A smile spread over the stoner's face. That sounded like a challenge: not only in the making of it but, more importantly, the smoking of it. He'd be shit-faced for a month, but the buzz would be un-fucking-believable. Let's do it! Lloyd quickly began assembling the makings, licking sheet after sheet of

cigarette paper before gluing them together, creating a conical shape. Next he filled the cone with grass, emptying the bag into it before sealing the joint at its thin end. Now all that remained was getting the mother of all joints lit and then he'd be higher than a kite in a hurricane, man.

"Need a light?" A figure was standing in the shadows by the door.

"Yeah, man! How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess," the stranger replied. "Come here, I've got what you need for the job."

"Cool." Lloyd scrambled from the bed, grabbed his monster joint and hurried over to the stranger. The teenager shoved the thin end of the joint in his mouth and nodded. "I'm ready, dude!"

The shadowy figure dragged a match down the wall, igniting it. He held the flame in front of him, the dancing light revealing scarred and burnt skin stretched taut across his features. "You can't always get what you want, dude...'

"...but you get what you need," Lloyd said, completing the quotation. "Good song, man, good song. Now, come on, light me up!"

"You asked for it, fucker!" The stranger flicked the match at Lloyd. It lit up the end of his joint, and Lloyd began sucking air into his mouth. But instead of inhaling fumes, the flames continued racing along the joint towards his face.

***

Alex was flying, swooping and soaring above the suburbs. Below she could see all of Springwood with its crisscross quilt pattern of streets and avenues spread across the ground. Looking down, Alex could see the town's people going about their lives: mowing lawns, walking the dog, driving their cars, painting their picket fences. They were all too busy or self-absorbed to see her high in the clouds overhead. It looked just like a thousand other towns in middle America, flags hanging outside most of the houses and a car in every garage.

Alex laughed among the clouds. The wind held her aloft, currents and eddies twisting and tumbling around her. Her arms stretched

out sideways, balancing her in the sky. The sense of freedom was exhilarating, as if she had been released from the everyday world below. She was free, free to go where she wanted, to do what she wanted. If only her dad was here to enjoy this moment with her.

Far below a man emerged from 1428 Elm Street, walking toward a car parked nearby. Alex squinted to get a better look at his face. There was something familiar about the man, the way he held himself, the upright stance and relaxed gait. It couldn't be him, could it? Alex's mind rebelled at the possibility, but the girl was already imagining scenarios to explain his presence. Dad must have tracked them to Springwood and had come to visit, and she was too busy flying to be down there with him.

"Dad! Dad, I'm up here!" Alex shouted, but he didn't hear her, didn't seem to notice. I need to get closer, she realized, and tilted her chest forward, dropping into a dive. She swooped down through the air, clouds whipping past, the cold air chilling her face and arms. "Dad, wait. I'm coming!" But the man continued to his car, opening the driver's door and getting inside.

"Not this time," Alex vowed. "You're not getting away from me this time!" She plunged headfirst at the ground in a steep dive, pulling up at the last possible moment and landed neatly on her feet. The car sat on the other side of the street, its engine idling. All the windows were tinted, but she could see a figure inside, the silhouette of a man in the passenger seat. She ran toward the car and beat on the driver's window with her fists.

"Dad, open up. It's me, Alex."

For a few seconds nothing happened and she was afraid he would drive away. Then the driver's electric window slowly descended to reveal the car's interior. The man inside smiled at her, his lips parting to show a mouthful of blackened teeth and rotting gums. "Hello, Alex. Come to Daddy!"

***

Heather was running late. Her transatlantic flight had been delayed, her suitcases had been last on the baggage carousel and

traffic from Charles de Gaulle Airport into the center of Paris was horrific. At last she reached the venue and ran inside, out of breath and frantic with worry. She burst into the changing area, pushing past several startled, half-naked women to reach her chair. "Sorry I'm late, Jean-Paul," she called to the designer. "Nightmare journey. You wouldn't believe the horrors I went through to get here!"

The French fashion legend waggled an admonishing finger at her before delivering a playful kiss to the air above each cheek. "Heather, my dear, if you weren't the best, I would never forgive you. Hurry and change into your first outfit, you are to be on the catwalk any minute, *oui*?"

Heather nodded, grateful Jean-Paul understood her so well. She quickly shed her loose-fitting top and skirt before reaching for the clothes rail to one side. But all the hangers were empty, a long line of nothing waiting to be worn. "Hey! Who took my outfits?"

The other models shrugged or shook their heads, denying all knowledge. Heather called Jean-Paul back. "Sweetie, I can't change into my first outfit if I don't have one, can I? Tell one of the dressers to bring me the proper rail."

Jean-Paul looked at her, perplexed, one hand ruffling his trademark bleached blond hair. "But, Heather, this is your rail. Don't you remember the theme for this show? The Emperor's New Clothes! It's all the rage this season. Everybody is going naked down the catwalk *aujourd'hui*."

"But I—"

"Look around you," he urged. "Do you see anybody wearing anything?"

Heather searched the changing area and realized he was right. All the other models were stripping naked, removing the last of their lingerie before striding purposefully towards the catwalk entrance. "Are you sure about this?"

"Ma cherie, darling, ma petite chou," Jean-Paul replied soothingly. "You of all people have nothing to fear from this. Are you not my beautiful princess?"

"I suppose..."

"Then get those things off and get out there. You're already late for your first trip down the catwalk."

Heather shrugged and reached behind herself to undo the clasp of her bra. But the hook and eyes seemed to be stuck together, refusing to unclip. Jean-Paul rolled his eyes melodramatically and moved to help her.

"Let me, princess!" He clawed at the catch, but couldn't unfasten it. "What is wrong with this? Mon Dieu! Have you glued it together?"

"I don't know," Heather admitted. "I don't remember."

Jean-Paul threw his hands up in the air, exasperated. "Oh, just pull it off over your head! We haven't got time for this!" Heather did as he urged, ripping the bra upward until she was free of it. "The panties too, they must go," he said, motioning frantically with his right hand.

"I'm doing it, I'm doing it," Heather snapped, pushing her panties down to her ankles and then stepping out of them. "Satisfied?"

The designer stared at her, horror in his eyes. "My darling, what have you been doing to yourself?"

"What do you mean?" Heather looked down and gasped. Instead of her young, toned teenage figure, she had the body of a seventy year-old woman. Her breasts sagged toward the floor, while stretch marks fanned outward across her stomach. The greatest shock was her pubic hair, which was turning gray before her eyes. "What's happening?" Heather whispered. "This isn't my body." She looked to the designer for reassurance. "This isn't my body!"

Jean-Paul closed his eyes and began shoving her toward the catwalk entrance. "I don't care whose body it is, you've got to get out there. This is the biggest show of the year and everyone is waiting to see you, to photograph you, to broadcast your image around the world. If you don't go out there I'll be ruined, ruined!

"No, please," Heather begged. "Don't make me do this."

"Go," Jean-Paul shouted and propelled her through the entrance out onto the catwalk. Thousands of flash bulbs went off from all directions, a dazzle of lights. Heather threw one hand in front of her eyes to shield them from the glare, while the other hand tried to cover her crotch. The audience gave a collective gasp when they saw her ageing, drooping figure.

"Please, this isn't my body," Heather told them. "You've got to believe me, this isn't my body!"

Then the laughter started: first one voice, then another, then dozens, all roaring with laughter at the pathetic figure caught in the stage lights, the sound stripping away the last of her dignity. Heather ran back toward the changing area, still feebly trying to cover herself from view. "Please don't laugh," she whimpered. "This isn't my body, it's not me."

Jean-Paul was standing in her path, blocking any escape. "You don't escape your adoring public that easily," he snarled. "Get back out there, *salope*!"

Heather burst into tears, unable to control her emotions any longer. "Please don't make me, Jean-Paul. Anything but that."

Jean-Paul smiled, but the grin was more of an evil leer, thin lips on a cruel face. When he spoke, his warm French accent had become a bestial snarl. "Do it, bitch!" Heather felt four metal blades resting against her stomach. "Or else I'll gut you where you stand."

***

Insistent hammering on his bedroom door woke Peter up. "What are you doing in there?" his father shouted. "You've been playing with that machine all night! Go to bed and let me get some goddamn sleep!"

"Okay, okay," Peter called back. He listened as his father stomped off to the bathroom. I must have fallen asleep while still online, Peter realized. He looked at the page on screen and was grateful for the lock that stopped his father bursting in. The monitor was filled with thumbnails for a porn site. In each of the images a teenage student with long, red hair was progressively shedding her clothes until she was completely naked. The photos had apparently been taken by a hidden camera; the site a voyeur's paradise of stolen moments. Peter shook his head. How would I explain this? Dad would think I'm even more of a freak than he already does.

A new window appeared in the center of the screen. Pop-ups, the bane of a geek's life. Peter sighed. The software he'd downloaded

earlier should have prevented any pop-up from appearing on screen. He reached for his mouse, shifting the cursor so he could close the window.

"You don't want to do that, Peter," a soft, feminine voice whispered.

He stopped, startled at hearing his name spoken. His computer's audio channels were switched off, yet the words had definitely come from the machine, hadn't they? Peter switched the speakers on, then off again, to make sure. They were definitely silent now. Must be a faulty circuit.

"There's nothing faulty with me," the voice sighed.

Peter peered around his bedroom, past the piles of DVDs and computer games and crumpled clothes, trying to find where the words were coming from.

"I'm right here," she said. "On your screen."

Peter felt the hairs on his neck standing up. He turned to face his monitor. The teenage girl from the voyeur website was smiling at him from the pop-up window. "That's right. It's me," she giggled.

"I don't understand," he said. "How did you—?"

"Ssssssh!" she said languidly, holding a finger to her lips, motioning him to silence. "Don't spoil the moment by trying to explain it, Peter. Enjoy yourself."

"This must be a dream," he decided. "I must have been given the serum, not the placebo. Dr Kerry said it could cause intense dreaming."

"And he was right," the girl replied. "I'm Lauren."

"Err, hi," Peter said. "Pleased to meet you, I guess."

She shook her head, smiling at him. "You don't have to introduce yourself to me, Peter."

He shook his head. "I don't know what you mean..."

"How many times have you visited my website?"

"I'm not sure. Once or twice, at the most."

"Dozens of times, Peter. You've watched me getting undressed over and over again, and you've enjoyed watching me. I've seen how much you've enjoyed it, if you know what I mean." She winked at him.

Peter could not stop himself blushing. "You can see what I'm doing while I'm looking at you?"

Lauren nodded. "Oh, yes. You're very enthusiastic, aren't you? Does your girlfriend know how you feel about me?"

"I don't have a girlfriend," he admitted. "Not yet, anyway."

"So, you've been practicing for the big day?"

"Something like that."

Lauren smiled. "How about I give you a hand?"

Peter frowned. "What do you mean?"

She reached forward and her hand emerged from the computer screen, fingers first, then her palm and wrist, until all of her forearm was protruding from the monitor. "Don't be coy, Peter. You know exactly what I mean."

"Oh! But this is impossible, you can't—"

"This is a dream," Lauren said. "Nothing's impossible in dreams. Now, it's my turn to watch you get undressed."

Peter stripped off his clothes eagerly. I don't care whether this is a dream or not, he thought, I'm going to enjoy every second while it lasts. As he straightened up Lauren touched his back, her soft fingers stroking the skin. The hand slid downwards, curving round to grasp his buttocks, pinching the cheeks of his ass playfully. "What a cute little butt you've got, Peter. Do you work out?"

"N-no," he stammered, excitement getting the better of him. "I go swimming three nights a week."

Lauren's hand crept to his hip and reached around to his crotch. "My, my, what a big boy you are! Let me get a look at you in the flesh." Peter slowly turned around, his movements guided by the hand caressing his groin. "I was right," Lauren giggled. "That's quite a handful you've got there."

Peter closed his eyes and groaned as her fingers closed around him, the hand slowly sliding up and down. "Oh god," he whispered. "I don't think I'll last long before I... Oh god."

"Don't worry about that, Peter," she replied. "I've got something here that'll keep you distracted."

"What's that?" he asked, another groan escaping from him. Suddenly the hand let go of him. "No, don't stop," he pleaded. Peter's

eyes snapped open when he heard the sound of what he thought were knives. He looked down at the monitor, but the arm reaching from the screen wasn't Lauren's any more. Instead, he saw something very different sticking out from a sleeve of a dirty red and green sweater. A frayed glove covered the hand, a glove with four slices of metal protruding from its fingers. The blades reached toward Peter's crotch, while a man's voice shouted at the teenager from the computer.

"The first cut is the deepest, you little shit!"

***

Kat woke up in a waiting room, the stale air thick with the smell of cigarettes and incense. The walls were lined with posters of tattooed men, their bodies decorated with elaborate designs in multicolored inks. In front of her a coffee table was laden with photo albums, the one on top labelled Holes and Shit. She reached forward and opened it up to the first page. The spread featured photos of different ears, each displaying a variety of studs and earrings. The following pages were devoted to more body-piercing photos: pierced eyebrows, noses and tongues, then belly buttons and nipples. Kat had seen similar books in other tattoo and piercing parlors. The men and women who did this were proud of their efforts and often took pictures to chronicle their work.

Kat continued flicking through the pages of the album, each spread more extreme than the last. She winced at the sight of pierced genitals, male and female. I've had holes put through most parts of my body, but that's where I draw the line, she decided. Another turn of the page revealed even more disturbing photos: piercings through eyelids, between fingers, even through the jaw. Shit, who could do that to themselves? She was afraid to look at the last page in the album, but a terrible compulsion made her look. A woman was impaled on a massive spike, the bloody end driven into her back and out through her stomach. Kat threw the album to the floor in disgust, but it stayed open at the same page. She looked at the woman's face

in the photograph... and realized it was her own. What the fuck? I'd never let anyone do something like—

"Kat Walker?" A male voice called from beyond a red and green striped curtain separating the waiting room from the rest of the parlor. "You're next."

Kat shook her head. "I've changed my mind. I'll come back another day."

"But you've got an appointment. You can't leave now."

"I've got to go," Kat insisted. She strode to the front door, but it refused to open. Heavy deadbolts snapped into place, one after another, locking themselves shut. Kat clawed at them with her fingers, but couldn't undo the bolts. She banged her fists on the door, calling to the pedestrians passing on the sidewalk, but none seemed to hear her. "Hey! Hey, open the door! Somebody, help me! Help me!"

"I'll help you," a voice from beyond the curtain replied. The striped fabric was ripped aside, revealing a menacing figure. Kat couldn't see his face because of the shadow cast by a brown fedora hat, but the glinting metal spike clenched in one hand was all too familiar. It was the same spike she had seen in the photo, the one stabbed through her body. "What do you want to have pierced this time, bitch?"

***

Chris had been walking for what felt like hours, but the end of the corridor never got any closer. He tried running, but the light in the distance remained as far away as before. "Hey, where you going?" Chris recognized Luke's voice. At last, somebody was coming to see what was going on. Luke appeared beside him, holding the plaque from the testing room door.

"I pressed the call button, but nobody came," Chris explained.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I must have switched them off by mistake when I dimmed the lights," Luke said. "So, what's the problem?"

Chris shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. I must have gotten the placebo. The others are still asleep in there."

Luke shook his head. "None of you got a placebo."

"But Peter said—"

"You don't listen to that nerd, do you? I thought you were much smarter than that. Tell you what, why don't you prove how smart you are?" Luke hung the plaque on one of the corridor walls. He waved a hand across its surface, and most of the engraved words disappeared, leaving the names of the two doctors: GF Deuer, D Kerry. Luke stepped back and pointed at the plaque. "Rearrange the letters and you'll find a secret."

"You mean like an anagram?"

"Exactly."

Chris moved closer to the plaque, studying the letters, moving them around in his mind to create new words. "I think it's a name."

"Very good," Luke said, standing behind Chris. "But whose name is it?"

"Fred... Freddy. The first word is Freddy."

"That's right." Luke clapped his hand appreciatively on Chris's right shoulder. "Now, what can you make from the rest of the letters?"

"It's... Gree... no. Kreeg? Wait, I got it. It's Krueger. Freddy Krueger." Chris said, smiling briefly. The smile faded from his features as he looked at the hand clasping his shoulder. It was a battered glove with four razors gleaming in the dull light of the hallway. They slid across his shoulders to his neck, the edges pressing into the skin. Chris swallowed hard, not daring to move. "Who are you?" he whispered.

"I'm your worst nightmare—and now I own you! All of you!"

FIVE

Lloyd dropped the huge joint and began stamping on it, crushing the flames beneath his sneakers. "Fuck, dude, that was not cool!" He realized the man who had flicked the lit match at him was gone. "Hey, where'd you go?" The stranger reappeared behind Lloyd, chuckling to himself. But when he spoke, the words were inside Lloyd's head. *I think you'll need a roach clip to finish that baby*. Lloyd peered down at the discarded joint. Something was moving inside it. He leaned closer for a better look. Dozens of cockroaches burst from the still smoking remains. "Fuck!" Lloyd stepped back, but the stranger's hands grabbed him by the shoulders and held him in place. The cockroaches scuttled across the floor to Lloyd, then started climbing his boots and on to his legs. Lloyd tried to kick them off, his legs dancing an impromptu jitterbug, but the roaches had already disappeared up inside his jeans. He could feel hundreds of insects scrambling up his thighs, moving closer to his—

***

Alex was running along Elm Street, the car driven by that monster bearing down on her, inching closer, his maniacal laughter echoing in her ears. She wanted to run off the road, to find some way of escaping, but her legs kept stumbling forward as if they had a mind of their own. "Run, little bitch! Run while you still can. When Daddy catches you, he's going to turn you into a real woman. He's going to rip you in two." The car's engine roared louder as it accelerated toward her. Alex stumbled and fell, sprawling on the asphalt, tensing herself for the crunch of metal against her body, the final, crushing blow.

***

Heather felt the blades slicing across her abdomen, cutting into the skin, blood spurting outward. She clasped at the wounds, trying to hold them together, to staunch the bleeding, but it was hopeless. She

sank to the catwalk, crimson pooling around her body, begging the audience to help her. But they stayed in their seats, laughing and pointing at her naked, pathetic body. Photographers and cameramen closed in for a better angle, shouted at her to look up, to give them a smile. Heather waved her bloody hands at them, but the torment continued as her life leaked out across the—

***

Peter gasped as the knives cut deep into him, slicing through his groin as if it was butter. Something fell to the floor and then blood was spurting from the open wound, gouts of red spraying the computer screen. Peter staggered backward, clutching at his crotch, staring down at himself. He screamed and screamed, his voice a squeal of horror to his own hearing. A man's snarling face was visible on the monitor, his features tinted red by the splashes of blood still running down the screen. He was laughing at Peter while licking the crimson edges of his fingerknives. "How neat—sweet meats!" Peter could feel darkness engulfing him, a cold numbness already spreading down his legs.

***

Kat smashed her fists against the door of the tattoo and piercing parlor, but the glass panel did not break. Behind her she could hear him coming closer, light glinting on the spike in his hand. Kat threw herself sideways, escaping the first stab of metal. There was no escape in the waiting room, the empty space was cluttered with chairs and the photo albums, images of pain spilling from every page. She staggered away, backing past the red and green curtain, deeper into the salon. She took another step backward, but there was no floor beneath her foot. Kat twisted around to see a pit underneath, the bottom lined with silver spikes all pointing upward. "No, no!" she cried, her arms waving in the air, trying to regain her balance. It was too late. Kat fell over backwards, tumbling toward the—

***

Chris sat bolt upright in bed, his breath coming in gulps, and his chest falling and rising rapidly as he gasped for air. He touched his throat carefully, but the blades were gone, the fingerknives no longer slicing into his neck. It had been a dream, a very vivid dream. So much for getting the placebo. That's it, I am out of here, Chris decided. Then he looked at the others.

All five were thrashing around in their cots, faces contorted with agony, hands beating or clawing at their bodies as if fighting off invisible attackers. Shit, I have to help them. Chris sprang from his bed, going to Heather's side first. She was whimpering and sobbing, begging for help, her hands scrabbling at the bed covers. The material of her T-shirt had been sliced apart in four places. Chris grabbed Heather by the arms and started shaking her violently. "Heather! Wake up! Heather, you're in a nightmare. Wake up!" Her eyes snapped open and she screamed, an agonized cry of pain and terror. "It's okay! It's me, Chris. You're safe!"

Heather blinked twice, the scream dying on her lips. She looked down at her body, then relaxed, her shoulders slumping forward. "I'm not... It's okay, I'm not... It was a nightmare."

Chris nodded, smiling at her. "That's right, it was a nightmare, a bad dream brought on by the serum, I guess. You okay now?"

Heather sat up again and winced, one hand reaching for her stomach. "I don't know," she admitted.

"Stay here," Chris commanded. "I've got to wake the others." He ran across to Kat's bed. She was screaming abuse and flailing at the air with her arms, battering Chris as he leant over her, pinning her arms to the mattress. "Kat, wake up!" he shouted. "Wake up!"

She opened her eyes and started sobbing.

"You're safe now," he said soothingly. "Are you hurt?"

Kat shook her head. She looked around the room, dazed. "Alex? You okay?"

Alex was crouched on top of her bed, one hand thrown forward as if holding something at arm's length. "Keep away from me, you bastard! Keep away!" Beyond her Peter was curled into a fetal

position, moaning and sobbing, while Lloyd was clawing at his own face, gibbering incoherently

"We've got to help them," Chris said. Kat was already out of her bed, moving to Alex. Chris ran to Peter while shouting to Heather. "You've got to wake Lloyd before he hurts himself!" Peter snapped awake as soon as Chris touched him, while Alex fainted when Kat woke her. But Heather could not get close to Lloyd because his movements were too frenzied.

Chris punched the red button above Peter's bed, hoping this time it would work. He ran to the door and yelled along the corridor when Luke appeared in the distance. "Get the doctors. Something's wrong with Lloyd!"

"Oh shit," Heather whispered. "It's him."

Chris spun round to see a figure standing over the thrashing figure of Lloyd. It was a man in a dirty red and green striped sweater, bloodstained jeans and boots, his skin a mess of half-healed scars and burns.

"You! What the fuck are you doing here?" Kat demanded.

"No need to swear," the figure admonished. "We're all friends here."

"You're no friend of ours!" Kat shouted. "We don't even know your name."

"It's Krueger," Chris said, remembering the anagram from his dream. "His name is Freddy Krueger."

Krueger smiled, a twisted sneer of amusement. He flexed his right hand to show off the fingerknives dancing in the low lighting. "See? You do know me. Some better than others. Isn't that right, Alex?"

She had regained consciousness. Kat was holding her back, stopping Alex from trying to attack their tormentor. "Fuck you, Krueger! Let Lloyd go."

The monster laughed at her. "I'll let him go if you call me Daddy, bitch."

"Never! You're not my father, you're just some sick fuck from our nightmares," Alex screamed back.

"We'll see," Krueger replied. He gestured at Lloyd who was still hitting himself and shouting incoherently. "This one thinks he's

being eaten alive by cockroaches. Why don't I help him out?" Krueger rested one of his blades close to Lloyd's hairline then sliced across the forehead. Lloyd's scrabbling fingers reached toward the loose flap of skin.

"No!" Chris shouted. He flung himself at the bed, but Krueger smashed a backhanded blow into Chris's head, sending him back across the room. Krueger leaned closer to Lloyd and whispered in his ear. "The roaches are getting under your skin. You need to get them out, now!"

Lloyd's fingers closed around the loose flap of skin at his forehead and tore it downward. The skin peeled away, exposing raw flesh and bone underneath. The others staggered back or cried out, Peter involuntarily vomiting on the floor.

"Now Lloyd is really getting shit-faced!" Krueger laughed, rejoicing in their disgust. He pointed his fingerknives at the five teenagers. "I'll see you in your nightmares. You're my children now." He began laughing again. The sound of footsteps could be heard running toward the room. Krueger gave them a wave and faded away.

***

Luke burst into the room, switching on all the lights. "What the fuck?" Five of the volunteers were standing around one of the beds. Blood and vomit was spattered on their clothes and pooled across the floor. Worst of all was the grisly figure sprawled on the cot. Lloyd—it must be him, Luke decided, judging by the hair and clothing—was a bloody mess.

He resembled one of those drawings Luke remembered from anatomy class that showed what the human head looked like with its skin removed. The eyeballs and teeth were still normal, but the rest of the face was a crimson smear of torn flesh and muscles, the exposed white bones shining under the lights. Blood gurgled from either side of the mouth and flaps of skin peeled back from Lloyd's features, hanging down toward the pillow beneath.

"What the hell happened?" Luke demanded, but the others didn't reply. Their faces were blank masks of disbelief, their heads shaking

from side to side. Luke reached his fingers past the tattered flaps of skin to Lloyd's neck, checking for a pulse. "Thank Christ, he's still alive."

Dr Kerry was next to arrive, hurrying into the room as Luke dialed a telephone by the door. "What are you doing? What is..." Kerry's voice trailed off as he saw the faceless figure on the bed. "Paramedics! We need paramedics!"

"That's who I'm calling, you stupid bastard!" Luke snarled back. "Get over there and try and keep Lloyd alive until they get here. He's going into shock."

***

Alex watched numbly as Kerry and Deuer battled to keep Lloyd breathing. The other volunteers were comforting each other, trying to stay calm, but Alex felt a quiet detachment from everything happening around her. It was as if she was watching events on television, and was not even in the same room. For all I know, I'm still in a dream, a nightmare. Any minute now I'll open my eyes and be home again. Mom will be calling me down for breakfast and I'll...

"Alex! Are you alright?"

Alex frowned. Something important had happened here, something...

"Alex. Can you hear me? Alex."

A vicious slap across the face snapped Alex back to reality. She glared at Kat who was standing over her, hand drawn back and ready to deliver another hit. "What the hell are you doing?" Alex shouted at her.

Kat smiled apologetically. "Sorry, but you were falling asleep again. I didn't want you having another dream, not until we get out of this place."

Alex looked around the room. They were back in the Katja Institute's waiting area, among the lime green sofas and brown carpet. Chris was comforting Heather while Peter was curled up in a corner not looking at anybody. Kat stood over Alex, staring at her. "Is it time to start the drug trial yet?" Alex asked.

"Start? It's already happened." Kat replied. "What, you think everything we went through was a dream?"

"I wasn't sure..." Alex admitted. "What about Lloyd? I saw him peeling off his own face. That couldn't have been real, could it?" The sound of people running became audible, getting louder and closer.

"Clear the way," a female paramedic shouted as she hurried into the waiting room, dragging a stretcher on wheels behind her. Another paramedic ran behind the stretcher, pushing it toward the main entrance while shouting updates about the patient's condition. Their voices were strained.

"See for yourself," Kat said, pointing at the body on the stretcher. Lloyd was strapped down, his fingers still twitching, his clothes stained crimson by all the blood. A neck brace had been applied to stop him thrashing about. Above it was a red smear of bandages and tubes, hair matted with blood. Lloyd's mouth screamed wordlessly, expelling inhuman noises of pain and fear.

Alex sank back on to the sofa. It was true, it had all happened. Even the dream. If I had died in my dream, I would have died for real, Alex realized. She didn't know how she knew that, but she did. The creature that attacked Lloyd, who had tried to run her down in her dream, he had been the orderly who cut her arm in the first nightmare, the one she'd had at home. Somehow, it was all connected, it all meant something, but what?

Dr Kerry had followed the stretcher out into the waiting area. His pristine white coat was smeared with blood, a crumpled red handprint visible where Lloyd had tried to push the physician away. Kerry watched as the paramedics loaded Lloyd into their ambulance and drove away. Once the vehicle was out of sight, Kerry remembered the other volunteers. He looked at them in turn before speaking, his face heavy with worry. "What about the rest of you? How do you feel?"

Chris stood up and glared at the doctor. "We're fine, physically."

"What was that shit you gave us?" Kat demanded.

"I told you, it's an anti-insomnia drug that—"

"Bullshit!" Chris shouted, throwing himself at Kerry, pushing the doctor against a pillar. "Our friend ripped his own face off like it was

a Halloween mask. Tell us the truth or else I'll do the same thing to you. Who is Freddy Krueger and why is he after us?"

Kerry shook his head. Alex could see the doctor was bewildered and had not recognized the name of their tormentor.

"Chris, let him go. He doesn't know."

Chris glared into Kerry's eyes, searching for answers. Eventually he released the doctor and stepped back, hands held up in the air. Kerry tried to regain his composure, straightening his clothes and cleared his throat.

"Look, I know what's happened has been a terrible shock for all you—"

"Yeah, especially Lloyd," Kat interjected sarcastically.

"But we're still trying to determine why it happened. Luke has told me some of you may not be twenty-one years of age, is that correct?"

"We're all still in high school, you moron." Chris snapped.

"Oh God," Kerry breathed. "Then this will have to be a police matter. If you provided false information on those medical questionnaires, there's no question of direct liability on the part of Morpheus Pharmaceuticals. The drug trial is being suspended immediately until we can be certain there is no contaminant or foreign substance within the serum. I have contacted the parent or parents listed on your consent forms, and they should be here to collect you shortly. No doubt the police will want to question you at some point in the next day or two. Whether your friend will be able to answers those questions..." Kerry glanced hopelessly toward the main doors.

"It was his second dose," Peter said quietly from the corner.

"What did you say?"

Peter approached the doctor. "Lloyd took part in the same drug trial last Friday. This was his second dose of your serum."

"That's impossible," Kerry replied. "Volunteers are only allowed to participate once, due to the hallucinogenic qualities of the serum."

Kat laughed mirthlessly. "That's why he did it. Told us your drug was all that and more. Your orderly, Luke, he was splitting his finder's fee with Lloyd."

"We'll be ruined," Kerry muttered, shaking his head.

"What about Lloyd?" Heather demanded. "Look what your serum did to him. What has it done to us?"

"I don't understand."

"He's coming for us," Heather hissed at the doctor. "He's coming for all of us. He's already put Lloyd in a coma. What's he going to do to us?"

"Who?" Kerry asked. "Who are you talking about?"

SIX

"Krueger. His name is Fred Krueger." Alex was back at home, sitting on a chair in the kitchen, and being interviewed by an overweight cop from the Springwood Police Department. Officer Goodman was scribbling down everything she said in his notebook, but that gave him pause. He peered at Alex intently.

"Did you say Krueger?"

"Yes. Why?"

The cop shrugged and shook his head. "I want to make sure I get all the facts right for my report. How would you spell that?"

"How the fuck should I know?"

"Alex!" Her mom walked into the kitchen, lighting a cigarette. "The officer is trying to do his job, don't swear at him."

Goodman smiled at Alex insincerely. "That's okay, ma'am. She's been through a traumatic experience, no telling what effect it's having on her. Her memory of what happened is likely to be a little scrambled."

"My memory is fine," Alex insisted. "I didn't get a chance to ask that bastard how to spell his name when he was trying to run me down or when he was helping to peel off Lloyd's face, but if I had to guess, I'd say K-R-U-E-G-E-R."

Goodman nodded, but didn't write down the name. "And you say he was in your dream?"

"He was in all of our dreams," Alex replied.

"How do you know that?" the cop asked.

Alex frowned. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "We didn't get a chance to talk about what happened before our parents arrived. But, somehow, I know he appeared in all of our dreams—all of our nightmares." She gave a detailed, graphic description of Krueger and what he had done.

"Uh-huh." Goodman closed his notebook, not bothering to take down any more of what Alex had said. "Well, it's obvious you've had quite a shock. I suggest you try and get some rest. When you're

feeling better, why don't you come down to the station and see if you can pick this Krueker out of some mug shots."

"His name is Krueger, not Krueker." Alex pointed at the notebook. "You didn't even write his name down."

But the cop ignored her, turning to talk with Alex's mom. "Mrs Corwin, you might want to give your daughter some sleeping tablets or mild sedatives, if you've got any in the house."

"Why are you treating me like a child? Why are you ignoring me?" Alex demanded. She grabbed Goodman's shoulder, intending to twist him round to face her. But instead she was knocked back by a wave of emotions: fear, anger and panic. Alex tumbled into her seat, rocked by what she had witnessed. "You already know him!"

"What?" The cop swiveled round and stared at Alex. "What did you say?"

"You already know Krueger. You've heard of him before." Alex blinked, still processing the feelings she had perceived when touching Goodman. "You're afraid of him, afraid of what will happen if... if other people start hearing his name. Why?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the cop insisted, his face flushed with anger. "If you'll excuse me, I have to go. Plenty more people to see yet."

"You're not going to do anything about this," Alex said accusingly. "You believe if you do nothing, maybe this will go away. You're wrong." She closed her eyes, exhaustion overtaking her. "Dead wrong."

Goodman shook his head. "I don't know where this is coming from, young lady, but you're the one who's in the wrong here. You lied on a medical form, illegally took part in a drug trial and are now making wild allegations based on nothing more than something you've seen in a bad dream."

"Not a bad dream, a nightmare."

"Have it your own way." The cop turned to Alex's mom. "Could I talk to you outside for a few minutes, ma'am?"

She smiled thinly. "Of course. Alex, why don't you go on up to bed? You look exhausted. The officer is right, some sleep would do you good."

"I'm fine," Alex spat back.

Her mom followed Goodman to his patrol car out on the street. Alex watched them from the kitchen window, the policeman resting a comforting hand on her mom's left shoulder. The cop gave a last glance at the house before driving away. Alex had felt a shudder of fear and revulsion emanating from him. He must have been one of the officers called to this house when the murder happened, before we moved in. No, it was more than that; there were feelings of loathing and quiet terror inside him too. Goodman was frightened of the house, of what it represented.

Joyce came back inside and insisted that Alex go to bed. "I don't care whether you're tired or not, you need to rest. And don't think you're going anywhere this weekend either. You are grounded for a month."

"Grounded? Christ, Mom, I almost died today!"

"You ditched school, took part in a drug trial without my consent, and as for the wild stories you were telling that poor officer..."

"It was all true, Mom. Why don't you believe me?"

"You lied to me this morning, Alexandra. Why should I believe you now?"

Alex let herself be led upstairs. She recognized that obstinate look on her mother's face, it was the same look she got once her mind was made up. Like mother, like daughter. Right now her mom would brook no opposition and Alex knew better than to try. But that didn't mean she was meekly going to sleep. Shit, after what I've seen today, Alex thought, I might never sleep again.

***

Peter's trip home from the Katja Institute with his father was one long, stony silence. It was only when they were inside the house that the questions started. What was Peter doing there? Why did he volunteer for the drug trial? Why did he cut school? Was this some kind of teenage rebellion, because that wasn't going to be allowed, not in this house, not while you're under my roof, young man. You live by my rules or you don't live here at all. On and on it went, the

lecturing, the questions, the demands for answers that went ignored. You know I had to give up a day's work to come and collect you? I'm going to be docked a day's pay. Well, you'll be paying for that out of your pocket—no allowance for the next six months. Why can't you be more like other teenagers? You spend all day on that computer when you could be out playing sports like any normal kid. Peter felt the rage boiling inside, but kept it bottled up, not wanting to give his father the satisfaction.

It was only when the old man went for the ultimate veto Peter snapped: no more computer. You can't be trusted to do the right thing, so you can't be trusted to have the computer in your room. "For Christ's sake, Dad—"

That earned Peter a smack across the face. "Don't you take the Lord's name in vain, boy."

"Like you give a shit about the Lord's name unless it suits you."

Brian O'Mahoney stood over his son, ready to strike him again. Peter glared at his father, unabashed. "You want to hit me again? Do it. Do it, if it'll make you feel like a man. That's all you understand, isn't it?"

"How dare you talk to me this way. You will learn to respect your elders and betters or else you will suffer the consequences."

"You might be my elder, but you certainly aren't my better."

"Take that back or else I'll—"

"Or else you'll what? Beat me so hard I end up in hospital like Mom? You should have gotten cancer, Dad, not her."

Brian undid his belt and tugged it through the loops on his jeans. "I've heard enough of your smart mouth for one day."

"Like you'd know anything about having a smart mouth. You want to hear something funny, Dad?"

"Stop calling me that."

"I'm not that smart myself. There are kids at school way smarter than me. You know the difference between them and me?"

"Shut your mouth, boy."

"They coast along, getting by on natural ability, while I'm busting my ass, studying every hour of the fucking day and night to keep up with them."

"I said shut your mouth."

"I used to do it so I could win a trophy at the end of the year awards ceremony. I knew I'd never win a sports trophy like you did at school, but I figured any kind of trophy was better than none at all."

"That's it. I warned you. Now I'm going to hurt you." Peter's father clenched the belt buckle in his palm and coiled the strap round his hand, leaving two feet of leather hanging free.

"I did it because I wanted you to be proud of me. But you never came to the awards ceremony, not once. I brought home a dozen trophies and you never congratulated me, never said a fucking word."

Brian thrashed the leather strap down on his son.

"Then I realized what I was doing wrong. It's not that you don't care about my academic achievements, you're threatened by them. You think I make you look stupid. You want to know something? You're right."

"Shut up, you little bastard. Shut your mouth." Peter's father hit him with the belt again.

"I can't wait for the day I go to college, Dad. And when that day comes, you will never fucking hear from me again."

"Damn you, boy, damn you to hell."

Peter glared at his father. "I'm already there, Dad. I'm already there."

***

Heather retreated to her room once her mom had gotten them home. No doubt the old bitch wanted a heart-to-heart, mother and daughter conversation, but Heather couldn't cope with another dose of lies and hypocrisy. There had to be more to life than beauty pageants and modeling contracts, or finding a rich and handsome husband to pay all the bills. There had to be more to life than joining the ladies who lunch, or the women who played tennis in the morning before fucking the club pro at his apartment in the afternoon. There had to be more to life than paying homage to the

gin bottle, downing mid-morning pick-me-ups, more to life than charge cards and lusting after dishwasher repair men. Plastic surgery, sun beds, boob jobs, Botox, padded bras, hair dye—shit, there had to be more to life than all of that, right?

Heather sat in front of the mirror and stared at her own reflection. How often had she puked up lunch to stay thin? How many cigarettes had she smoked to stifle her appetite? How many times had she let one of the jocks feel her up to make sure she stayed popular with all the right boys?

"Princess, are you alright in there?" The words were slurred together, the ice cubes clinking in a glass. Mom was enjoying her late night therapy.

"I'm fine," Heather replied wearily. "I think I'll get some sleep."

"Okay, darling. We all need our beauty sleep."

"Yes, Mom." Heather stared at her reflection, but the face in the mirror belonged to Lloyd. She watched as the red line appeared across his forehead, blood trickling downward from the sideways cut. Then Lloyd's hands reached up and began tugging at the skin, tearing it down, peeling it away.

Heather closed her eyes, trying to steady her breathing. It was the same sequence of events, replaying themselves over and over in her mind. I don't know if I'll ever be able to look in a mirror again, Heather thought. She was exhausted, but the prospect of falling asleep, of slipping back into that nightmare world filled her with horror. Anything but that. She waited until her mom had staggered downstairs before sneaking out to raid the plethora of pills in the bathroom. There must be something here to keep sleep away. One night without dreams and I'll be okay. Amidst all the Prozac and Valium, Heather found a plastic bottle of No-Doze with three tablets rattling around inside it. She dry swallowed the pills before retreating to her bedroom and locking the door. It was going to be a long night.

***

"What were you thinking? Have you any idea how badly this reflects on us as parents?" It had been Chris's mother who collected him from the Katja Institute, but that only delayed the inevitable tirade from his father. Mr Harris finally got in at eight, after he worked late at the office. Gideon insisted on eating his evening meal before dealing with his son. Once the dishes were done, Chris was summoned to explain himself and his actions. He made a few halting excuses, but was quickly cut short. His father sat at the kitchen table while his mother stood meekly to one side. "We try to live our lives as pillars of the community, showing respect for others and hoping for their respect in return. How was what you did today showing respect for your mother and I?"

"Dad, this wasn't about you," Chris began.

"I know rebellion when I see it and I see it in your eyes tonight. You would set aside everything we've worked for to satisfy yourself, is that it?"

"No, I—"

"You'll speak when I say you may speak, is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's better. Now, answer my question. Have you any idea how badly your actions reflect upon us as parents?"

"I... I don't know." Chris stared at the kitchen floor, ashamed of himself.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you, son." Chris forced himself to meet his father's gaze. "That's better. Now, answer my question."

"Why don't you ask if I'm alright?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I thought I was going to die today, but all you seem to care about is your reputation, your standing in the community. Doesn't that seem a little selfish to you... sir?"

"How dare you speak to your mother and I like that."

"Mom hasn't said a word, she never does. She's too frightened to contradict you," Chris snapped. He swallowed, hard. Shit, we're into it now. There was no easy way out from where this was heading.

"Say that again?"

"You heard me."

Gideon Harris stood abruptly, his chair skidding backward across the kitchen floor. "You will apologize, this instant."

"Why should I? You couldn't give a shit about what happens to me. As long as I get my scholarship, as long as I turn professional, as long as I bring in the bucks and make you rich, you'll be proud, you'll be happy. All you care about is having everybody respect you, having people point you out in the street and say there goes Gideon Harris, his son's a basketball star."

"You don't know what you're—"

"Yeah, everybody will respect you and everybody will forget that you're black, because that's what you really want, isn't it?"

"Go to your room, Christopher."

"No. For once in your life you're going to listen to what I want to say, you're going to hear me out. All the respect in the world won't change a thing. You'll still be ashamed of what you are."

Chris's father began ushering his wife toward the kitchen door. "We don't have to listen to this abuse. We're going to bed."

"You can't change the color of your skin, Dad. It doesn't matter what I do."

Gideon pushed his wife aside and grabbed the front of Chris's shirt.

"Go on, hit me." his son snarled. "Show me exactly what kind of parent you really are." Father and son glared at each other until, finally, Gideon turned away, shaking his head.

"You disappoint me," he said quietly, then left.

Chris sank into a chair and wept.

***

Kat could not help smiling. She'd had to walk home from the Katja Institute because neither of her parents came to collect her. Typical, fucking typical. They'd rather be out bothering God or bashing a Bible than making sure their own flesh and blood was home safe. Then again, I haven't given them much reason to care about me, she admitted. You could only abuse a person's beliefs so far before they gave up on you. Guess that makes me a lost cause. Kat smiled again.

Isn't there a patron saint for people like me? When she did get home it was dusk, and the rest of the family was busy saying their evening prayers. Kat rolled her eyes and went straight to her room.

She'd never been close to anyone at Springwood High. Sure, she'd hung out with the more extreme elements for kicks, but mostly they were prime time, grade-A assholes. It was moments like this when Kat wished she wasn't quite so self-reliant. Having a friend to talk to wouldn't be that bad right about now. But who would believe what she had witnessed today? Only the other four volunteers, and Lloyd. But Lloyd wasn't talking to anybody, Chris was way too straight for Kat's liking and as for Princess Heather, forget it. An after hours chat with dork squad Peter didn't bear thinking about either.

But Alex... there was something different about her. Kat had spotted the scars on Alex's forearms. Suicidal tendencies or something else? Then there was the punk hairstyle and no-nonsense attitude. Everything about Alex screamed stay away, leave me alone. Kat recognized a kindred spirit when she saw one. Yeah, I could stand talking to Alex.

The phone in Kat's bedroom rang, startling her. She'd had a private line installed a year ago to stop her parents listening in on conversations. It had the additional bonus of stopping addled stoners like Lloyd ringing the rest of her family during Bible studies and talking shit down the phone at them. Kat waited three rings before picking up the receiver. She spoke without thinking, somehow already knowing who was calling. "Alex? Is that you?"

"Yeah," the other girl replied. "How did you... Never mind."

"Funny, I was thinking about you," Kat said.

"You needed someone to talk to?"

"Yeah."

"Me too."

There was a long pause before either of them spoke again, Kat eventually breaking the silence. "Fuck, that must have been some weird shit they gave us today. I had this nightmare, a real freaking horror show."

"Tell me about it," Alex urged. When Kat was done, it was Alex's turn. She recalled her flying dream, how it had been twisted and

warped.

"When Krueger was standing over Lloyd, he said you knew him better than the rest of us," Kat remembered. "He wanted you to call him daddy. What the fuck was that all about?"

***

In her bedroom Alex sighed. She hadn't wanted to talk about her other nightmare, the one with the psychiatrists, but she couldn't lie to Kat either. They were both involved in this and they had to stick together. So Alex forced herself to relive the nightmare, detailing it all down the phone, every embarrassing revelation. When she'd finished, there was only silence. "Kat? You still there?"

"Yeah, still here. How long have you been cutting yourself?"

"I did it for about three years, after my dad left us. Mom found out and made me see every shrink on the East Coast. At least, that's what it felt like. Eventually I met this woman in therapy who used to cut herself too, and she persuaded me to stop. I haven't taken a razor to myself for months, not until that dream the other night."

"But that wasn't you, don't you see? That was Krueger. He cut you in the nightmare so you got cut in real life too. That's how he hurt Lloyd."

Alex peeled the dressing away from her arm and looked at the four wounds. For a moment she thought she could see tiny maggots crawling out of the cuts, their minute mouths feeding on her blood and skin and flesh and—

"Alex! You still awake?"

Her eyes snapped open. "Fuck! Every time I drift off, I start having another nightmare."

"Try coffee and pills," Kat suggested. "I'd offer you some speed, but my usual supplier is currently in a coma at Springwood General Hospital."

"Lloyd?"

"Yeah, I phoned and got his condition. He's still in intensive care: critical but stable, whatever that means."

Alex had felt something earlier, a shared pain between her and Kat. "Why did you ask how long I'd been cutting myself? Did you used to—"

"No, of course not."

Alex frowned. "If we start lying to each other, we're fucked. We both need someone to trust. God knows, there are not many other candidates on offer."

"You're right," Kat agreed. "But I didn't cut myself. I used to... Cigarettes, *that* was my thing. I used to put them out on myself, on my skin."

"Jesus," Alex winced. "That's why you got all the tattoos, isn't it?"

"How did you...?" Kat's voice trailed off. "It's strange. Ever since we were injected with that drug, it's like I'm different. I can't explain it, but I keep getting little flashes, like I know something's gonna happen, but before it does. Like when you phoned, I knew it was you before I picked up."

"Me too," Alex agreed. "Not glimpses of the future, though. It's as if I can sense what people are feeling. Like I'm tuned into their emotions."

"Radio Free Alex?"

"Something like that."

"For all we know, we're both still asleep at the Katja Institute and this is the dream," Kat suggested. "Wouldn't that be a mind fuck?"

Alex kicked off her shoes and lay back on her bed. "Yeah. But this is all real; I can feel it, sense it. I always know when I'm in a dream, I've always known. Makes me feel safe, no matter what's happening. At least, it used to."

"Until we met Krueger."

"Yeah."

"Hey, is it true you've never...?"

"Never what?"

Kat laughed. "Done the dirty deed."

"Oh. That." Alex grimaced. "Not yet. At least, not with anyone else. What about you?"

"Me? I'm the Slut of Springwood, according to my parents. But I've got my standards. I don't do it with anybody younger than me, and

nobody over twenty-five."

"And...?"

"It's overrated. I'm not saying sex isn't a rush but, well... You'll see."

The phone clicked twice and Alex heard her mom's voice. "Honey, are you on the line?"

"Yes, Mom, I am. Could I please have some privacy?"

"Sorry." Joyce hung up hurriedly.

"I better go," Alex said. "Mom's wound up enough after what the cop said."

"Someone came looking for me earlier, but I hadn't made it home by then. What did he say?"

"I didn't hear what he told her, but the blame's all going on us. I told him about Krueger and he wouldn't even write the bastard's name down. It was like the cop already knew about him, but didn't want to admit Krueger exists."

"I've got two rules I live by: never trust the pigs, and never trust your parents," Kat said. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Yeah. I need some sleep but I'm scared shitless of closing my eyes."

"I know what you mean. 'Night."

"Goodnight," Alex said, and hung up. Coffee and pills. Better hope we've got something besides decaf downstairs. I wonder what Peter's doing right now. She felt like seeing him. Maybe they could keep each other awake.

SEVEN

Peter lay on his bed, staring at the gaping absence where computer had been. It was in the garage, confiscated, locked away, out of reach. His dad had also taken Peter's portable TV and all the stereo equipment from the room. "You're so damn smart, try reading a book. You've got plenty of those."

"Joey Johnston broke my glasses," Peter had protested.

"Use your old pair. Or didn't you think of that, smart-ass?"

Fuck you, Peter thought to himself. His back was aching from where the leather strap had hit him repeatedly. I'll be black and blue in the morning, he realized. Christ, the sooner I escape from this shit hole, the better. Keep my grades up and there's no reason I can't get early acceptance to a good college. Scholarships would be plentiful, especially for someone with his grade point average and relatively impoverished background. Being president of the school's math and physics clubs might mark him out as a full-time nerd, but it had helped in pushing him to excel. "The geeks will inherit the earth," was Peter's motto. If someone like Bill Gates can become a billionaire, imagine everything I could achieve.

Peter closed his eyes and thought about Alex. He'd always liked her, ever since the first day she arrived at Springwood High and was introduced to his homeroom class. That cute nose, the freckles, the spiky hair; it pushed all the right buttons for Peter. Sure, he might surf the net for babes with big breasts and few morals, but that was fantasy. The first time he did it with a real girl, a real woman, he hoped it would be with someone like Alex.

Thinking about her was getting him horny, but thinking about almost anything got him horny. The encounter with Krueger had scared the shit out of Peter, but it also made him realize something: he didn't want to die a virgin. Yeah, yeah, doing it wasn't the be all and end all of human existence, at least that's what the teachers always said during sex-ed. Literally speaking, they were wrong of course. Without sex the human species could not procreate and would die out, but that was the pedant in Peter talking. He knew

there was more to life than sex. But when you're a teenage virgin, it seemed to occupy an awful lot of time in your thoughts. Peter shook his head and smiled. Hell, I've got nothing better to do, might as well relieve a little tension. He eased down the zipper of his jeans and slipped a hand...

A knock at his bedroom door startled him. "Hold on!" he called, hurriedly jumping off the bed and straightening his clothes. "Who's there?"

"It's me, Alex."

"Alex? What are you doing here?"

"I've been thinking about you. I had to come and see you."

Peter smiled. "I've been thinking about you too."

"Well, are you going to let me in, or do I have to stand out here all night?"

"Sorry." Peter unlocked his door and let her inside, then swiftly locked it again. Alex raised an eyebrow at his actions. "Keeps my dad out," Peter explained, trying not to blush. "You know... parents."

Alex grinned. "I know." She was wearing a tight-fitting T-shirt adorned with a large happy face with a bullet hole in the middle of its forehead, trickling blood, scuffed jeans and battered Nikes. She glanced around the bedroom littered with dirty clothes, books and DVDs. "No computer?"

"My dad took it away. Punishment for today's incident."

"Mom grounded me for a month. She doesn't know I've snuck out."

"Won't you get in more trouble?"

"Probably." Alex nodded at the bed. "Do you mind if I...?"

"Sit down? No. Please. Go right ahead." Peter hurriedly kicked his discarded boxers under the bed and straightened out the sheets before waving for Alex to sit down. She patted the mattress, so he joined her on the bed.

"You said you'd been thinking about me too?"

Peter smiled shyly. "Yeah."

"I figured you must have been."

"Oh? Why?"

"Let's say you look happy to see me," Alex replied and pointed towards his crotch. Peter glanced down and was mortified to see his zipper was still wide open. He stood up and pulled it shut, careful not to injure himself.

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry," he stammered. "It's not what you think, I wasn't... I'm not some sex fiend or anything, I was going to, umm, to —"

"It's okay," Alex replied as she moved closer to the flustered teenager. "I've been thinking about you too."

"You mean...?"

Alex nodded and smiled. Her hands reached forward and slowly undid the top button of his shirt. "There's nothing wrong with that." She undid the next button, then another and another until his shirt was hanging open. "It's only natural. And after what happened to us today..."

"I know," he agreed, trying to keep his cool and failing as she slid her hands across his chest, fingers playfully tweaking his nipples. She slipped his shirt back over his shoulders and pulled it off, dropping the garment to one side.

"Now it's your turn," Alex said mischievously.

Peter swallowed hard and reached for the bottom of her T-shirt, lifting it upward to reveal her stomach, then her white cotton bra. Alex raised her arms in the air and Peter tugged the T-shirt over her head before throwing it aside. "Oh boy," he murmured and rested his hands on her breasts, gently caressing them through the bra.

"You can take that off too, if you like," she whispered.

Peter reached behind her back and fumbled with the clasp. Alex helped him then let the bra fall forward over her shoulders and down to the floor. She leaned closer and kissed him, her breasts pressing against his chest, her nipples like points of heat on his skin. Peter felt Alex's hands sliding across his back, stroking his shoulder blades. But one of the hands felt rougher than the other, as if it were covered in a tattered glove instead of skin.

Peter pulled back from Alex and grabbed her right arm, holding it away from him. The hand was inside a battered brown glove, four knives of razor-sharp metal protruding from the fingers. Peter looked

at Alex, but the person leaning against him wasn't Alex anymore—it was Krueger, laughing.

"What's the matter, big boy? Don't you do this on the first date?"

***

Alex emerged from her bedroom, yawning. She could hear her mom talking along the hall, a one-sided conversation on the phone. Sounded like Aunt Sylvia was getting chapter and verse on Alex's latest adventure into the world of troubled teens. Like I need that new age witch telling mom how to create a better bond with me. Last time Aunt Sylvia offered some of her advice, Alex had spent a weekend with her mom inside a pyramid-shaped tent beneath a healing crystal, listening to a CD of whales humping. Spare me the tree-hugging hippy shit, Mom, and we'll both be happier.

Alex wandered down the stairs, thinking about what Kat had said. Never trust the pigs, never trust your parents. That policeman knew more about Krueger than he was willing to admit. Why was he trying to shut her up? Why was he trying to deny the truth? Tomorrow I'll get Peter to do a little digging on the net, see what we can find out about this freak. If the cops already know about Krueger, there must be files about him somewhere, and Peter was just the geek to find them. Thinking about Peter made her smile, made her feel happier. She was looking forward to seeing him again. Guess I have got an itch for him. I wonder if he thinks about me?

She went into the kitchen and filled the coffee maker with water. Finding the coffee proved more difficult. Her mom insisted on only having decaf out on the kitchen counter, but Alex knew they had something with a bit more kick in one of the cupboards. Before she could start looking, a noise from the hallway startled her. "Mom? Is that you?" She went to the door but could still hear her mom upstairs on the phone. The noise sounded again, metal scraping across metal. What the fuck was that?

She noticed the door, to the basement was ajar. Alex hadn't been down there since the day they arrived in Springwood. All their nonessential stuff was still in boxes in the basement. When you

moved as often as they did, there didn't seem much point in unpacking everything right away. Mom sometimes went down to check the boiler was fine, but otherwise neither of them had any reason to visit the basement.

The sound came again, grating on Alex's nerves and setting her teeth on edge. Whatever was causing it, the noise was definitely coming from the basement, she was certain of that. Alex went to the door and opened it, flicking on the light switch before leaning inside. "Hey! Anyone down there?" No reply. She could see shadows moving below, jumping and flickering in the light. "Come out where I can see you." Nobody replied, nobody responded. "Have it your own way, asshole," Alex muttered and began closing the door. The metallic scraping sounded once more. Alex yanked open the door and pounded down the stairs, making as much noise as possible. Maybe there was a raccoon down there and she could frighten it into leaving.

You're in another dream, a quiet voice whispered inside her head. *You've fallen asleep. This is another nightmare.*

"I know," Alex told herself. But she kept walking down the creaking wooden steps.

Wake up, the voice urged. *You've got to wake up!*

"I can't." Alex stepped on to the basement floor. "I have to see what's down here." She looked around the room. It was surprisingly warm, the boiler pumping out plenty of heat. Cobwebs hung like shrouds from the crossbeams, while one wall was obscured by dozens of cartons marked PROPERTY OF CORWIN and FRAGILE: THIS SIDE UP! Alex could hear dripping in the distance, but there shouldn't be any water down here, unless the tank's leaking. Another sound mingled with the dripping... No, two sounds: metal clinked against metal, and somebody breathing, panting

"Who's down here?" she asked, helpless to stop herself from playing out the vision, each step an involuntary movement taking her closer to the truth.

"Come and see," a familiar voice rasped, taunting and teasing. "Come to Daddy!"

Alex wanted to run, to escape, but she couldn't. Her legs were moving of their own volition, taking her past the boiler. A door swung open, revealing a spiral staircase. It was made of metal, the steps a fine mesh grill, and the handrail oily and tubular as it disappeared downward. She couldn't see the bottom of the staircase, rising steam obscuring what lay below.

This is impossible, the voice in her head hissed. *You know there's nothing beneath your basement: no metal stairs, no steam, no hidden room. This is not a dream, it's another nightmare. Wake up, Alex. Wake up now!*

Still she went on, venturing out on to the landing atop the staircase. Behind her the door slammed shut, then ceased to exist. She slammed her fists against the wall, but there was no way out, no way back. She was trapped, trapped inside her nightmare.

***

"Honey? Are you nearly ready?" Heather opened her eyes, startled by the sound of knocking. She was still in front of the mirror in her bedroom. At least she was seeing her own reflection in its surface now, instead of watching action replays of Lloyd ripping off his face, but why was she wearing a prom dress? "How does it look, Heather? Does it fit okay?"

Heather stood up to get a better view. She was wearing a slender gown of cream silk that clung to her like a caress. It was strapless and daringly low cut, but she had the figure to carry that off—not too buxom, but not flat-chested either. Her blonde hair was sleekly drawn back from her face, a diamond tiara holding her locks in place. Even her make-up was immaculate. I look like a princess, Heather decided. She opened the bedroom door and did a twirl for her mom. Tammy was speechless with delight, tears welling up in her eyes.

"How do I look?" Heather asked, already knowing the answer.

"Beautiful," Tammy replied. "Every inch the prom queen you are, darling."

"Thank you, Mom."

Tammy smiled. "I know I've pushed you hard, but take one look at yourself in the mirror and say it wasn't worth it."

"No, Mom, you were right," Heather conceded. "This is everything I've always wanted. Is my date here?"

"No, but your limousine is waiting downstairs. He dropped off your corsage while you were getting ready. He said he doesn't want to see you in the dress before the prom, in case it's bad luck."

"Don't be silly. That's wedding dresses, not prom dresses."

Tammy giggled girlishly. "Maybe he's planning to pop the question."

"Mom, you're being ridiculous," Heather said, but could not help feel a thrill of excitement at the thought. What if he did pop the question tonight? What would she say? She shook her head and headed for the stairs, hitching up her dress to avoid treading on the fabric on her way down.

Her limousine was waiting out on Elm Street, a black stretch with tinted glass windows. An elegant chauffeur in a black suit and peaked cap held the passenger door for her to get in, nodding politely as she passed. Heather paused to give her mom a last wave from the sidewalk.

"Have a lovely night." Tammy called from the front door. "Enjoy yourself."

"I will," Heather replied and got in, the chauffeur closing the door behind her before taking his place behind the steering wheel.

"Where to, Miss?"

Heather smiled. "The Springwood High School Prom, and don't spare the horses." She squealed with delight as the limousine peeled away from the curb. The long vehicle continued to accelerate along Elm Street, picking up more and more speed. "I was joking, driver, you don't have to go this fast. There's plenty of time."

But the chauffeur didn't seem to be listening. Instead he threw his peaked cap to one side, replacing it with another hat: a battered brown fedora.

"Driver? I said you don't have to go so fast, it's—"

Heather was cut off by the limousine taking a right turn far too fast, its tires squealing in protest. She was flung violently across the

back seat, thudding into the side of the vehicle. "Hey! What the fuck are you doing?"

The chauffeur tilted his head to grin at her, but it was Krueger in the driver's seat. "Shut up, bitch. I heard you the first time."

***

Chris was shooting hoops outside his house. It felt like his whole life had been spent standing in front of this garage, tossing the ball into the air, trying to shoot another basket. His father had mounted the hoop above the garage door on Chris's fifth birthday, measuring its position precisely to ensure the target was at regulation height off the ground. He even painted a free throw line on the drive so Chris could practice his shots from the right position. For thirteen years since that birthday Chris had been out here, practicing at least two hours a day. Hell, he could throw hoops in his sleep.

"Good shot," Lloyd called from the sidewalk when Chris scored another basket. "No wonder you're Springwood's star player."

"Hey, man, they let you out of hospital already?" Chris ran down the drive. Lloyd looked the same as always, the goofy grin, amiable smile and slumping shoulders. Even his white boy dreadlocks were the usual mess. "What about your face? How'd they fix that so quick?"

"Plastic surgery, dude; nip and tuck!"

"Yeah, but in one day?"

"What can I say? The miracles of modern medicine," Lloyd leaned a little closer. "You know what the best part was?"

Chris shrugged.

"The drugs, man. The shit they give you before an operation, it's a trip. I was higher than a fucking kite and twice as funky."

Chris couldn't help smiling. He liked Lloyd despite himself. The dope-head might not be the sharpest tool in the box, but he had a good heart. "Well, I'm glad you're feeling better. You scared the shit out of us."

"No need, man, no need." Lloyd pulled a Zippo out of the back pocket of his jeans and tossed it to Chris.

"What's this?" he asked, catching the lighter. The outline of a marijuana leaf was embossed on its sides.

"My Zippo, dude. I won't be needing it from now on. I'm going straight."

"You're giving up drugs?"

"Believe it, man. From now on it's pharmaceuticals all the way, prescribed and carefully measured doses, courtesy of an intravenous drip."

"I don't understand."

Lloyd nodded meaningfully at him. "You will, man. You will." The stoner was picking at the side of his face. "Well, time I was going, before my carriage turns back into a pumpkin, know what I'm saying?"

"Not really," Chris admitted. He winced as Lloyd tore away a long strip of skin, revealing the flesh underneath.

"Look after yourself, man. And remember the most important thing of all." Lloyd peeled another strip of skin from his face and flicked it to one side, as if it were a booger he'd picked from his nose.

"What's that?"

"Don't fall asleep, dude! I mean, you don't want to end up like me, do you?" The rest of Lloyd's face slid off, rolling down the front of his T-shirt before dropping on the sidewalk. "Shit! Will you look at that? Talk about your lousy workmanship." Lloyd bent over and nonchalantly picked up his face, shoving the slither of skin into his back pocket. "Well, catch you later."

Chris nodded and waved. That couldn't be normal, could it? What Lloyd just did with his own skin? Shouldn't the plastic surgeons have fixed that?

The faceless teen was strolling away, but paused to throw a comment back to Chris. "Hey, basketball dude. Be careful with my lighter, okay?"

Chris remembered the Zippo clutched in his hand. He gripped the metal sides between his fingers, preparing to flick back the lid. "Why?"

"I like a good-sized flame, know what I mean?"

Chris nodded and ignited the lighter. Flames exploded outward, engulfing his hand and face. Chris threw the lighter away, but still fire billowed around him, burning the hair from his scalp and eyebrows, skin sizzling as it cooked on his face. He tried to scream for help, but that just sucked the fire down into his lungs, scorching his mouth and throat. He collapsed on to the sidewalk, unable to breathe, burning alive.

***

Kat was flicking through channels on the portable TV in her bedroom. Amazing, more than two hundred stations to choose from, thanks to the wonders of cable, and every one was shit. I mean, how many times could you watch *The Wonder Years* without losing it permanently? Maybe that was what had happened to her parents. One too many exposures to *Little House on the Prairie* or *Touched by an Angel*, and they'd cracked under the strain. Kat was ready to give up altogether when she discovered a new channel. It had no station ID visible on the screen, nor did it seem to have any dialogue or sound. Instead the channel displayed a drawing of two snakes entwined around an upside down crucifix, the words SATAN IS MY MASTER written beneath.

There was something familiar about the image. Kat realized the channel was showing close-up footage of somebody's tattoo. But who would broadcast something like that on TV? It didn't make sense. Then Kat remembered where she had seen the tattoo before. It was exactly like the one on her back, between her shoulder blades. She peeled off her top and went to the mirror, twisting round to see the reflection, comparing it with the picture on screen. What she saw sent a chill down her spine, and a shiver reflected on the portable.

The tattoo being shown on TV was *her* tattoo, but how was that possible? Unless... "Unless this is a dream, another nightmare," she said out loud. "Fuck, I've fallen asleep, haven't I?" Kat reached behind herself and stroked a hand across the tattoo. Seconds later she saw a hand replicate the movement on her TV, but the hand

stroking her back on screen wasn't her hand. It wore a tattered glove with blades attached to each finger.

"Fuck! Fuck!" Kat screamed and jumped away from the mirror. She beat at her back, but found nothing there. It must be a mind game, another head fuck.

"Don't be so sure," a familiar voice hissed from the TV.

Kat watched as the snakes on the TV tattoo came to life, uncoiling themselves from the upside down crucifix. She glanced at her own back in the mirror, but the real tattoo remained static. Her gaze returned to the portable. The snakes hissed at her, forked tongues slithering out of their mouths, spittle flicking the TV screen from inside. The camera filming these bizarre creatures of ink pulled back, showing more of the skin over which the snakes were moving. It was a woman's back—no, not any woman. It was Kat's back. She was lying face down on her own bed, fast asleep while the snakes slithering across her skin.

The picture broke into static and Kat bashed a fist against the side of the TV. When the image returned, the tattoo snakes were no longer made of ink. They were real snakes, red with black and white rings round them, slithering across her back as she slept, moving up to encircle her neck. Kat found herself shouting at the screen, imploring herself to wake up, but it made no difference. The coiling continued until both snakes were wound around her neck several times. Then they began to squeeze.

Kat staggered back from what she saw, suddenly unable to draw breath. Her windpipe was contracting, cutting off the air supply. "Help me," she gurgled, but she knew no one was coming. This was a nightmare; nobody came to save you in nightmares. Already the blackness was closing in as her oxygen-starved brain began shutting down.

EIGHT

Alex crept down the metal staircase into the steam. Dreams are the product of my subconscious mind, she told herself, so my thoughts must be sending me here for a reason. Of course, she was trying to rationalize an irrational situation, but it was still a comfort, however fleeting. Clouds of mist swirled around her, coating her body with sweat. By the time she reached the foot of the staircase, Alex was dripping with perspiration, her nipples protruding through the fabric of her top. Great, now I can win any wet T-shirt contests I find down here, she thought wryly.

The space around her looked like it was an industrial boiler room. Pipes ran across every surface, while much of the floor was a mix of metal plates and grills, gaps between them hinting at further levels below. Huge sections of machinery were visible through the steam, dials and control panels coated in grime, rust and oil. Whoever runs this place, they're not exactly house-proud.

"Don't knock it till you've tried it, bitch," a voice hissed from the shadows

Krueger, Alex thought, instantly recognizing the gravelly tones and snarling hatred. This must be his domain. Does he bring all his victims here?

"Just the children," he whispered. "They all come to Daddy in the end."

"What do you want, you sick fuck?"

"I want you," he replied. His voice came at Alex from every corner, making it impossible to know where he truly was. Chains hung down from the ceiling, slowly swaying in the steam, clanking into each other, condensation dripping from their links. "I want you and all your friends. You're mine now, all of you: you're my possessions, my playthings, my disciples."

"You're wrong, Krueger. I don't know who you are, but you don't scare me," Alex vowed.

"We'll see. Let's play a little game."

"What kind of game?"

"Hide and seek. I'm already playing with your friends. Find them in time and you might save them, for now."

"And if I refuse to play?"

"Then I hope you enjoy seeing other people suffer." His voice died away, replaced by taunting laughter that echoed around the vast chamber. There was another voice behind it, crying out for help, pleading.

"Help me... Please..."

"Kat!" Alex ran through the boiler room, searching for her friend without success. "Where is she, Krueger? What have you done to her?"

"She's over here, bitch!" Alex spun round to see Krueger's face on a portable TV on top of a workbench. He sneered at her and then gestured behind himself. As Alex approached the TV she could see Kat on the screen, writhing around on a bed, hands clutching at her throat.

"Kat, wake up. Wake up, you're having a nightmare." Alex screamed. When she reached toward the TV, her hand was quickly drawn towards it, as if being sucked inside by some powerful force. She tried to pull away, but whatever was dragging her into the screen was too strong, too powerful. Alex managed one last scream before she disappeared inside the TV.

***

Kat was floating above her bed, yet the figure twitching and turning on the mattress below was also her. Guess this is one of those out of body experiences, she decided. But didn't you have to be dying to see yourself from a distance like this? She shouted at herself to wake up, but it was no use. The body on the bed twitched once more, then lay still. Game over, Kat thought. Cops will probably decide it was an overdose or an asthma attack, some stupid shit like that. Nobody would ever know the truth.

Alex burst into the bedroom, kicking the door open and throwing herself at the bed. She started shaking Kat's body, trying to wake her up. You're too late, the disembodied Kat thought, too fucking late.

Alex wasn't giving up yet. She rolled Kat's body over on to its back, pinched the nose shut and began blowing air into Kat's mouth. The dead woman's chest rose and fell, but gave no other reaction. Alex repeated her efforts, again and again, without success. She leaned on Kat's chest, pushing downward with all her strength. After five quick pumps she paused to blow more air down Kat's throat. "Come on," Alex shouted. "Come on!"

The disembodied Kat began to feel heavy, as if large weights were being hung around her neck. She fell down toward her body on the bed, accelerating as it rushed up at her.

"Gahhh! Huh! A-huh!" Kat gasped as she sat up, desperate to get some air back into her lungs. She kept panting, sucking in as much air as she could.

"You're okay, it's going to be okay," Alex said.

"Easy for you to say," Kat replied weakly. "Feels like you've been hitting me in the chest with a fucking sledgehammer! Where did you learn to do that?"

"Summer camp, CPR. It was really an excuse to kiss the boys."

"I'm just glad you didn't slip me the tongue." Kat rubbed a hand across her chest, trying to ease the pressure. "How did you know?"

"Krueger sent me to save you."

"Save me? Why would he do that?"

"I don't know," Alex admitted, "but he thinks we're his new toys. "She stopped abruptly, her eyes widening. "The others. He said you were all in danger. I've got to help the others."

Kat pulled herself upright, groaning with pain. "You can't do it all yourself."

Alex was already reaching for the door. "Forget it, you can hardly move."

Kat grabbed her by the arm. "I said I'm helping, okay?"

Alex hesitated then nodded quickly. "Go to Heather's place. I know where Chris lives, I've seen him out running in the mornings. We'll meet you at Peter's house." Alex ran, not waiting for a reply.

***

Chris rolled over and over on the immaculately tended lawn outside his house, beating himself with his hands, but the flames refused to go out. As soon as he'd put out the fire on one part of his body, it sprang to life on another. The pain was excruciating, like thousands of red-hot needles being stabbed into him, but the stench was worse. He could smell his own flesh roasting inside the cocoon of flames. I can't put this fire out myself, he realized. I need help.

Chris got to his feet and staggered toward the house, screaming for someone to come to his aid. He reached the back door and fell into the kitchen, collapsing across the floor. His mom was flipping pancakes at the stove, while his sister was finishing her homework at the table. But they didn't seem to notice his anguish, apparently oblivious to his torment. "Do you want maple syrup on your pancakes, honey?" his mom asked Marion. The little girl nodded happily and then pointed at the fridge. "And butter? You are hungry today."

Chris's father walked while adjusting his tie. Gideon kissed his wife on the cheek and sniffed the stack of pancakes appreciatively. "Those smell wonderful, dear. Good enough to eat!" All three laughed at the joke even though they'd heard it a thousand times before.

Chris reached a hand toward his father, flames dancing around the fingers. "Dad! Help me... Please!" At last somebody noticed him on the floor. Gideon glared down at his son and frowned.

"There you are, Christopher. Now what have I told you about burning to death in the kitchen?"

"Please, help me," was all Chris could whisper in reply.

"Don't scorch the flooring. It was only laid down two years ago and you know we can't afford to have it replaced anytime soon."

Chris's mother nodded her agreement, pointing an admonishing spatula at her son. "That's right, especially not if we have to pay for your funeral."

"Mom... Dad... I need your help," Chris begged.

Gideon shook his head. "You're a grown man, son. You have to learn to help yourself. Best you go up to your room and finish dying there. I don't want your mother spending all day having to clean up burnt remains in the kitchen."

"But I—"

"You heard me! Go to your room."

***

Alex hammered on the front door of the Harris's house. After several minutes a light came on in the hallway and a sour-faced man answered the door. "What do you want at this hour?"

Alex tried to push past him. "It's Chris, I think he's in danger."

Gideon grabbed Alex by the arm. "I don't know who you are, young lady, but my son is in enough trouble as it is. He doesn't need you bursting in here and—"

A scream of terror and pain ripped through the house, silencing the middle-aged man. "Dear God in heaven, what was that?"

"Chris!" Alex tore her arm free and ran up the stairs, Gideon following her. She reached the top floor, but didn't know which of the five doors to go through. "Which room is his?" she demanded.

Chris's father pointed at the nearest door.

Alex noticed a wisp of smoke curling out from under the woodwork. She reached for the door handle, but hastily pulled away after feeling how warm it was. "Shit, that's red hot. The room must be on fire."

Gideon looked baffled. "But we've got smoke detectors all through the house. They should be—"A high pitched wail cut him off as one by one the alarms came alive. He clamped his hands over his ears to block out the piercing noise. "How did you know?"

Alex ignored his question. "Have you got an extinguisher?" she shouted.

"In the kitchen."

"Get it." She watched Chris's father stumble down the stairs. Then the rest of the family spilled out of their bedrooms and Alex waved them downstairs. Smoke was filling up the landing, soon it would be impossible to breathe. Paint was blistering across the door to Chris's room. I can't wait any longer, Alex decided, and kicked at the wood once, twice. On the third try the door splintered inward around the

lock. Alex gave it a final shove then staggered back as flames burst out.

Squinting to look past the fire, she could see Chris writhing on his bed. All around him the room was ablaze, yet Chris didn't seem to notice. His bed was the only area not on fire. Instead he was beating himself as if trying to put out invisible flames. "Chris! Chris, you've got to wake up. You're having a nightmare," Alex yelled, but he didn't respond.

Gideon returned with an extinguisher, gasping for breath on the smoke-clogged staircase. A coughing fit overtook him and he slumped to the floor, still holding the red cylinder. Alex tore the extinguisher from his grasp and quickly read the instructions on its side. She turned it upside down, ripped out the locking pin and began spraying the contents into the burning room. Within a few seconds she had cleared a path to the bed and ran in, still dousing the flames that covered the walls and were creeping across the ceiling.

After emptying the extinguisher she threw it aside and clambered on the bed. Chris was still writhing about so Alex slapped his face, over and over again, until he woke. As soon as his eyes opened, the flames began dying away. "What happened?" he asked, choking on smoke fumes.

"You were having a nightmare... About being on fire, I guess. Can you walk?" Chris nodded so Alex helped him off the bed. They made their way down the stairs and out on to the lawn. The rest of Chris's family was already there, all of them coughing and retching, their faces and clothes covered in soot and grime. The wail of a fire engine's siren could be heard in the distance. Gideon approached Alex and thanked her for saving them all. "How did you know?"

"If I told you the truth, you wouldn't believe me."

"Try."

Alex took a deep breath of night air. "I saw it in a dream."

Chris stared at his hands and clothes, confusion clouding his face. "I was being burned alive," he whispered. "But I'm not even singed."

"Krueger was toying with you," Alex replied, taking his hand. "The others won't be so lucky unless we wake them in time." She began

pulling him toward Peter's house, but Chris was still lost in a daze. "Come on!"

***

The limousine screeched to a halt outside Springwood High's gymnasium, throwing Heather to her knees. When she sat up again, Krueger was gone. The driver's door hung open, a chauffeur's hat balanced atop the steering wheel. A corsage of delicate orchids was lying beside her in the limousine. Heather shook her head, trying to clear the cobwebs from her mind. Maybe I imagined the driver was Krueger, she thought.

The passenger door opened, making her jump, but it was her mom waiting outside, clad in a gown similar to the one Heather was wearing. "Haven't you put on your corsage yet?" Tammy asked with a note of exasperation. "What will people think if you haven't got a corsage? What will your date think? This is the most important night of your young life, missy, and you should try to make a good impression, don't you agree?"

"Yes, Mom," Heather agreed meekly. She got out of the limousine and let Tammy pin the orchids to her dress over the left breast.

"Close to your heart," Tammy whispered as she thrust the pin into place. It pierced the gown's material and jabbed Heather in the chest.

"Oww!" Heather cried out. "Mom, are you *trying* to skewer me?" She glanced at her dress and was appalled to see a red stain on the fabric. "For fuck's sake, you've drawn blood! The dress is ruined."

"Nonsense, dear," Tammy replied soothingly. She rearranged the corsage to cover the blood spot. "There, all better. Nobody will ever know."

Heather had to agree it looked fine. "Well, now's the big moment."

"I know," her mom said. "Your parade into the prom, then your coronation as queen of the dance. It was the proudest moment of my life. Enjoy it, princess."

"I will." Heather took a deep breath. "Wish me luck."

Tammy crossed her fingers on both hands and grinned at her daughter.

Satisfied, Heather began walking slowly, majestically toward the double doors ahead of her. The entrance was masked with curtains of tinsel and glitter. She reached out to part them and the shards of foil sliced into her hands and arms. "That hurts," Heather cursed under her breath. She tried again with her other hand and the result was the same; more fine cuts slicing into her skin, each wound drawing blood. How the hell were you supposed to get inside with this thing over the doorway? Heather grabbed the curtains and ripped them aside, pushing through the razor-sharp tendrils. As she did so the curtains fell over her again, tearing at her arms, chest and face. Tiny trickles of blood dripped from each wound. Just keep going, she told herself. Smile and keep going. Nobody will ever notice.

Inside, the gymnasium had been transformed into a magical space filled with balloons, laughter and music. Dozens of her fellow students were gathered in small groups around the room, sipping punch and admiring each other's clothes. On stage, Heather could see Principal Shaye acting as emcee for the evening, smiling into a microphone. She waved at him and he nodded, acknowledging her arrival. Shaye tapped the microphone twice to get everyone's attention then winked at Heather.

"Now, here's the beautiful young woman you've all been waiting for. The voting was intense, the campaigning relentless, but here at last is the person you've chosen as your prom queen: Heather Sutherland!"

A spotlight swung around from above and caught Heather in its brilliance, momentarily dazzling her. Shaye led the applause for her arrival, the crowd of students joining in enthusiastically at first, but the clapping died away as they got a good look at her. Heather kept smiling, but she could hear hushed whispers. *Will you look at that bitch? Who does she think she is? Look at that dress! What a disaster! Is that blood all over her? Why is she smiling? Can't she see how ridiculous she looks?* Heather realized the whispers weren't being spoken out loud, they were inside her head. I can hear what everyone thinks of me. Oh God, they all hate me! I've got to get out of here.

"Heather, you can't leave." Shaye called from the stage. "We haven't had your coronation yet, the moment every girl dreams about. It's time to begin your march of triumph among your fellow students." The principal nodded vigorously and the school song suddenly bellowed out from the gymnasium speakers. The students divided in two, clearing a path for Heather.

Reluctantly she resumed walking towards the stage, her feet keeping time with the music. She waved at the others regally, but all she could hear was what they *really* thought of her in her mind: the laughter, the abuse, the sneering. Keep smiling, Heather told herself, just keep smiling. At last she had completed the gauntlet and reached the stage, the principal helping her up the steps. Shaye snapped his fingers in the air before making another announcement. "Now, we have a very special treat. This year's prom queen is going to be crowned by the woman who was Springwood High's prom queen exactly twenty-five years ago. That's right, Heather, your own mom will be presiding over your coronation."

Tammy appeared from behind the stage, carrying a diamond tiara carefully balanced on a red silk cushion. She swept up the steps and smiled at the crowd. Heather wanted to shut out the voices inside her head, but still they taunted her. *Look at that old hag. Like mother, like daughter! You think Heather will be a washed up old slut of a drunk like her mom someday? One bitch deserves another!* Heather kept smiling, praying this agony would soon be over. Tammy lowered the tiara on to her daughter's head and then led the applause as the principal exhorted his students to clap.

"I present Heather Sutherland, your prom queen!" Shaye gave Heather a nudge with his elbow, urging her to take a bow. As the clapping died quickly away, he smiled at the newly crowned teenager. "But the surprises are not over yet, Heather, because for every prom queen, there must be a prom king. And here he is, your date for this evening..." Shaye stepped aside to reveal a paper screen adorned with a golden crown. "Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeere's Freddy!"

Krueger burst out through the paper, making Heather scream. She looked around the gym, but everyone else was laughing, applauding the new arrival, even her mom and the principal. Krueger took a bow

then approached Heather, a cruel grin spread across his features. "Got a kiss for me, bitch?"

Heather adamantly refused, but he grabbed her by the hair and clamped his mouth over hers, his twitching tongue forcing itself inside. Heather gagged, but Krueger kept kissing her, his tongue elongating as it slid down her throat. She opened her eyes and saw everyone clapping in time and chanting. "More! More! More! More!" Heather felt something stabbing her in the crotch, four sharp pains digging into her, but couldn't see what was happening down there.

Finally Krueger pulled his face away, his tongue retracting inch after inch from inside her. He grinned at the crowd, all of whom were applauding wildly, cheering him on. "She can take it all, boys! Remember that for later." Krueger retracting his fingerknives from Heather's groin and pointed at the bloodstain spreading across her dress. "What a shame, having the decorators in just as you're being crowned prom queen!" He leaned a little closer, his tongue stretching forward to lick the side of her face. "That's okay, bitch. I don't mind surfing the crimson wave, if you don't!"

***

Kat hammered at Heather's front door for five minutes before a drunken, disheveled mess of a woman answered. She peered out at Kat through red-rimmed eyes. "Jesus. Is it Halloween already?"

Kat shoved the woman with forty-proof breath aside and hurried upstairs. She found the right room after trying several other doors. Heather was curled on the floor, hands clamped between her legs, tears streaming down her face. "Don't touch me down there," Heather whimpered, her eyes staring through Kat. "Please don't hurt me again."

Kat shook Heather awake, fighting her way through flailing arms and screams of anguish to hug the sobbing girl. "It's okay. Everything's going to be okay," Kat said soothingly. "You're awake. You're safe now. He can't hurt you when you're awake. He won't touch you anymore."

Heather shook her head, the rest of her body still twitching and convulsing. "You're wrong, Kat. None of us are safe. We'll never be safe again." All of Heather's movements stopped abruptly as if she was listening to something important. "He's dying."

"Who?"

"Peter! I can hear him screaming in my mind." Heather was forcing fists into her ears, as if trying to block out noise. She clambered to her feet and hurried out of the room. Kat winced in pain as she staggered after Heather, still feeling the effects of Alex's frenzied CPR.

***

"What's the matter, Peter? Don't you want to touch me?" Krueger gestured for the teenager to come closer, using the fingerknives to beckon him nearer.

Peter was trying to unlock his bedroom door, trying to escape, but the catches and bolts had fused solid. He ran to the window instead and hammered at the glass, but it would not smash, would not shatter, no matter how hard he hit it. Outside he could see figures running down Elm Street toward his house. He screamed at them to hurry before it was too late.

The reflection of Krueger's face appeared in the window, moving ever closer. Peter twisted round to confront his tormentor. The gloved hand and head belonged to Freddy, but the rest of the thing standing in front of him looked like Alex, naked from the waist up. "Don't you like what you see?"

"Please, stay away from me!"

"Don't you want to see more? Isn't that what you've always wanted?"

Peter shook his head, but couldn't tear his eyes away. The gloved hand reached downward, sliding a blade inside the waistband of Alex's jeans. The razor-sharp edge cut through the denim, slicing the jeans apart. They slid down over her hips and crumpled to the floor. She stepped out of the jeans and closer to Peter. "That's better, isn't

it? Krueger hissed. "I want you to remember every moment of this, you little shit."

Peter could hear raised voices downstairs, his father arguing with people at the front door. "I'm up here." Peter shouted. He tried to push past the creature, but it grabbed his neck and threw him on to the single bed.

Krueger climbed on the mattress and stood astride Peter, fingerknives splayed across the front of Alex's white panties. "You want to see it all, don't you? You want to get up close and personal, you snivelling son of a bitch!" A flash of the blades and the material of the panties ripped aside. "Look at me," Krueger commanded. "Look at me."

Every fiber in Peter's being told him not to open his eyes but he couldn't stop himself. The creature standing over him was changing, warping before his gaze. Now, instead of legs, it was standing on two sharpened metal shears like the blades on a pair of scissors. Krueger laughed at the expression of revulsion on Peter's face. "I've shown you mine, fucker, now let's see yours!"

Peter turned away, not wanting to witness what happened next. To one side he could see his stacks of textbooks and DVDs piled up in the corner. He reached out toward them, not with his hands but with his mind, and flung them at Krueger. "Stay away from me, you bastard!" Peter screamed. The heavy volumes thudded against the creature, driving it back off the bed, while the plastic discs sliced into the monster's body, embedding themselves in the putrid flesh, green pus and maggots spilling from each wound.

Krueger laughed. "Is that the best you've got?"

"Fuck you!" Peter bellowed. "Fuck you to hell," He could hear footsteps, people running up the stairs and along the hall to his bedroom. "I'm in here. Get this bastard away from me."

***

Chris was first through the door into Peter's bedroom, closely followed by Heather and Alex. All three stopped abruptly, stunned by the chaos in the small space. Hundreds of DVDs and CDs were

embedded in the walls as if they had been shot at great speed across the room from different directions. The floor was littered with shredded paper and pages torn from dozens of books, empty leather and cloth bindings neatly stacked up in a corner.

Peter was hugging the far wall, crouched at the head of his bed, as if trying to claw his way out of the room. He stared right through them, glassy-eyed and deranged. "I'm in here. Help me, for the love of God, somebody help me."

"Peter, we're right here," Chris said, but his words went unheard.

"Kick the door in," Peter called. "Hurry. He's coming for me."

Heather approached from one side of the bed but was driven back by CDs flying at her, thudding into the wall above her head. "I can't get close to him," she shouted to the others, hands held over her ears. "He keeps screaming for help in my head. You've got to make him stop!"

Alex dived on to the bed, slapping Peter across the face repeatedly. "Wake up. You're still in the nightmare. Wake up, damn you." She gave him one last, almighty slap and he collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Alex leaned over him, trying to hear if he was still breathing. "I'm not sure if he's—"

Peter's eyes snapped open and his hands jumped to Alex's throat. "I've got you now, you bastard! I'm gonna wring your fucking neck!"

"No—" Alex gasped, choking out the words, "Peter. It's me! A-Alex!"

Chris grabbed Peter's hands, trying to pull them away from Alex's throat while shouting at the teenager. "Snap out of it, Peter. You're safe."

Peter blinked twice, the vehemence fading from his features. He released Alex, who fell backward on the mattress, coughing and gasping for air. "Shit, I'm sorry! Alex, are you okay?"

She nodded weakly, hands rubbing the angry red marks around her neck.

"I thought you were..." Peter slumped back against his bedroom wall. "He was trying to... I'm sorry."

Heather took her hands away from her head. "You don't have to shout so loud. I could hear you five blocks away."

Peter frowned. "How?"

"In here," she said, tapping a finger against her forehead. "I thought I was going to have a brain hemorrhage it was so loud."

"I didn't know," Peter shrugged. "Sorry."

Kat appeared in the bedroom door having finally got past Peter's father downstairs. "Hey, is everybody..." She looked round the room. "Fuck! Did you get a tornado to do your decorating?"

Peter followed her gaze, his face as amazed as Kat's. "What happened?" he wondered.

"You did," Alex said from the other end of the bed. "You did all of this in your nightmare."

"But I don't remember..." Peter's words trailed off as he recalled what had happened in his dream. "You think I did all of this?"

Chris nodded. "You almost killed us with flying CDs."

Kat looked at one of the discs embedded in the wall. "Decapitated by Norah Jones. Talk about your embarrassing ways to die."

The sound of approaching police sirens became audible as did the stomping feet of Peter's father coming up the stairs. "That's the cops," he announced. "They'll want to talk to you kids, all of—" His words were cut short by the scene inside Peter's bedroom. "What the fuck happened in here?"

***

Sheriff Williams knew he should have retired after the last incident on Elm Street. Every few years some punk kid dredged up the past and the whole sorry mess would start over again. Freak accidents, bizarre suicides, teenagers dying violent and horrific deaths. And always the same name would be mentioned, the same two words guaranteed to put the fear of God into any parent in Springwood: Fred Krueger.

That sick, twisted fuck had terrorized this town two generations ago: stalking the streets at night, abducting innocent children, then doing things to them, things that didn't bear thinking about, before murdering what was left. The sheriff wasn't even a rookie when the bastard was caught and brought to trial; it was before Williams's

time on the force. But the sense of shocked anger from when Krueger escaped justice on a legal technicality, that was still palpable among those who remembered it. The good people of Springwood had become vigilantes for one horrible night. They hunted the monster down to its lair and burned Krueger alive. The police department at the time not only turned a blind eye, but several of its staff had helped set the fire that killed the godless bastard.

In time everyone forgot about Krueger. He was a dirty little secret, something nobody ever mentioned; a shameful moment from the past that was best left there. A generation after he died, screaming and cursing those who had killed him, Krueger returned. The details were never made clear to Williams, by then a deputy with the department. All that mattered was the child-murdering pervert was taking his revenge from beyond the grave on the children of those who had killed him. He attacked kids in their dreams and if they died in there, they died in real life too. The focus for Krueger's vengeance was Elm Street, where most of the parents still lived, but the focal point was the house at 1428.

When Krueger was killed, Lieutenant Thompson had been among the cops who led the parents to that bastard's lair. It was Thompson who had thrown the first Molotov cocktail through the window, and it was Thompson who lived at 1428 Elm Street when Krueger died. For reasons probably known only to Krueger himself, that house became the repository for that bastard's undead spirit. Again and again the burnt-faced murderer came back to haunt this town, and that house always seemed to have a hand in the killing spree that followed.

Two generations on from Krueger's death, Williams was sheriff of Springwood. He was a good man, trying to keep the peace and help this town forget what it had done, and the curse that had brought upon it. The police, aided by the likes of Principal Shaye, the doctors at Westin Hills Psychiatric Hospital, and the parents, had managed to keep a good lid on the whole Krueger business until a few years ago. Then somebody dug up the past again and, sure enough, yet another corpse was found at 1428 Elm Street.

Williams remembered thinking at the time the county should have acquired the house with a compulsory purchase order and demolished it once and for all, just to make sure. But some smart-ass developer from out of town breezed into Springwood and fell in love with the property, blissfully unaware of its blood-soaked history. They lost a bundle renovating the place only to discover no sane person would set foot inside, and eventually had to sell it cheap to a local realty firm. The realtor put 1428 up for rental and, sure enough, a family had moved in, probably not believing how cheap it was. Yeah, we should have had the place demolished years ago.

The sheriff studied the reports spread across his desk at the station. The star shooter from the school basketball team sets fire to his own bedroom and has to be rescued by one of his classmates. Another student at Springwood High almost chokes to death in her own bedroom for no apparent cause or reason and is rescued by the same girl who saved the jock. Then there's the nerd who turns his bedroom into a war zone after a shouting match with his father. Judging by the medical reports, somebody had thrashed the boy mercilessly with a leather strap or belt, but nobody was talking about that. All of them lived on Elm Street, all within a few blocks of each other. And all had been involved in an incident at the Katja Institute the previous day, when another Elm Street kid ripped his face off after a drug trial went awry.

And the girl who ran around saving her friends, Alexandra Corwin, guess where she lived? Right in the middle of it all at 1428 Elm Street. Right in the heart of darkness. Williams brushed his graying hair out of his eyes and studied a report about this girl filed by Officer Goodman a few hours earlier. She claimed all of the kids had been visited by a monster in their dreams while taking part in the drug trial. She even spelled out the creature's name: Freddy Krueger. The sheriff sighed hopelessly. Cops in this town had standing orders: if anyone even mentioned that name, they had to report it to Williams immediately. Goodman could expect one hell of a reprimand when he came on duty in the morning. After the bloodbath that happened last time Krueger made an appearance, the sheriff hadn't wanted any more killing sprees on his turf.

Sweet Jesus, I should have taken retirement after the last time, he told himself. I could be deep-sea fishing, or sipping beer on a beach in Mexico, or touring the Midwest in a Winnebago, anything but reliving this nightmare. Well, it was too late for regrets now. They had to get this business stamped out. Krueger was like a cancer, you had to cut it out before the name could spread.

NINE

Alex smelled smoke when she woke. Something was burning. No, something had burnt, the scent was stale and thin. She sniffed her T-shirt. The smoke from the fire in Chris's bedroom was still clinging to the fabric. She peeled off the garment and threw it across the room and into the washing basket. Two points. A quick glance beneath the dressing on her arm confirmed the cuts were healing. The bruises around her neck where Peter had tried to strangle her were just as real. She hadn't been dreaming the whole mess, it was all true.

The cops had taken her and the others down to the station, careful to keep them separated. They were questioned into the early hours of the morning before being released into their parents' care. Each of the teens was given a bottle of pills called Hypnocil, purportedly for shock. When Alex protested she'd had enough of doctors and drugs for one day, the physician said this pill would suppress dreams and guarantee each of them several hours of uninterrupted sleep. That was an offer none of them felt like turning down, not after everything they'd experienced.

She rolled out of bed and looked at the calendar on her wall. Saturday. I can't believe it's Saturday. "Gee, maybe a trip to the mall would be nice, or maybe a malted at the diner?" Alex suggested sarcastically to the reflection in her bathroom mirror. Yeah, or another trip to the deranged world of my psyche, courtesy of Krueger. Christ alone knew what her mother must be thinking about this shit. How long before Joyce was getting her measured up for a straitjacket and a rubber room to wear it in?

Alex had a shower, trying to wash her fears away with the lingering smoke fumes. After drying herself she chose a fresh pair of black combat trousers and a red T-shirt to wear over black bra and panties, plus her favorite black combat boots. If I'm going to hell, I might as well be dressed for action, she decided, and headed downstairs for breakfast. Her mom was watching the morning news on a portable in the kitchen. She switched off the TV quickly when Alex bustled in,

but not before images of the fire engines outside Chris's house had appeared on screen.

"What's for breakfast?" Alex asked, keeping her voice cheerful.

"I haven't made anything," Joyce admitted. "There's juice in the fridge, cereal and milk if you want it. Or we could go out for something."

"Juice and cereal's fine." Alex poured herself a generous bowl, drowned it in low fat milk and started shoveling the mixture into her mouth. She could feel her mom's eyes watching every movement.

"I think we need to talk about what happened yesterday and last night," Joyce said hesitantly. "The police are worried about you, and so am I."

"Maybe I'll have some toast too," Alex announced, fetching two slices from a loaf on the counter and dropping them into the toaster.

"Alex, are you feeling alright?"

"Better for a good night's sleep."

"I noticed you hadn't been sleeping well lately."

"Nightmares and shit."

"The police still want an explanation for what happened."

Alex retrieved her toast and smeared butter across both slices. "Well, if they figure it out, they know where to find me."

"They need your help to do that."

"Yeah, right!" She munched into the crispy hot bread, enjoying the way the butter had melted into the surface. "I tried to tell them yesterday and they didn't want to know. Why should I trust the cops now?"

Joyce approached her daughter gingerly. "I need your help too, Alex. I want to understand what's happening to you."

"When I find out, you'll be the first to know, Mom."

"That's not good enough! I—" Joyce stopped, visibly straining to control her emotions. "How can I help you if you won't tell me what's going on? Is it a boy? Are you having problems with a boy?"

Alex smiled. "I wish it were that simple."

Or school? Are you being bullied? Is that why you cut class, why you went to that drug trial yesterday?"

Alex finished her toast, rinsed her cereal bowl under the tap and wiped the last crumbs of breakfast from her face. "Look, Mom... I know this isn't easy for you. It isn't easy for me either, but this is something I have to do on my own."

"Is it this Krueger? Is he bothering you? I can go to the police, find out what they know about him," her mom offered.

"Just stay out of it, okay?" Alex gave Joyce a quick kiss on the cheek before heading for the door.

***

Joyce watched her daughter leave before bursting into tears. She cried in the kitchen for a while before dabbing her face dry with a paper towel. Joyce went to the hallway and dialed Springwood's local directory service. "Yes, I'm trying to find a consulting psychiatrist, preferably one that specializes in treating teenagers."

She listened for a few seconds. "No specialists? How about general psychiatrists?" Joyce picked up a pen from the telephone table and found a scrap of paper to write on. "Western... How are you spelling that? Oh, Westin, I see. Westin Hills. And that's the only such facility in the area? Well, thank you for the number. You've been very helpful."

They had been down this road before, her and Alex, but the psychiatrists had given her daughter a clean bill of mental health a year ago. Maybe it was shifting town that had set Alex off again. Making new friends was never easy, especially at her age. Have I pushed her back into harming herself? Did I miss the signs? Joyce leaned against the wall, the burden of her emotions too much to bear. Tears ran down her face as she slid to the floor.

***

Kat arrived at Springwood General to find Alex already waiting outside. The medical center was a sprawling four-story structure of whitewashed concrete and green-tinted mirror glass; not the most welcoming of buildings. But the grounds spread around its perimeter had been sympathetically designed and carefully nurtured, providing

a haven for patients and visitors from the tragedies inside the hospital. Kat was walking past a Japanese Zen garden when she heard a voice white pebbles and call out.

"Kat. Over here." Alex was standing amidst the gray slate stepping stones, waving to her. Kat ventured into the garden. It was sheltered from the hospital by a row of fir trees, creating an oasis of calm. The two teenagers sat on a stone bench, enjoying the sun warming their faces from the blue sky, and savoring the crisp air of a spring morning

"How did you know I'd come here?" Kat asked eventually.

Alex shrugged. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "I felt it, more than knew. The others will be here soon."

"When I woke up, something urged me to come here this morning." Kat frowned. "Was that you?"

"I thought it would be a good idea if we all got together, talked about what's happened to us, and what's going to happen."

"But how did you...?"

"I wish I could explain it," Alex replied. "At least in a way that would make sense to the cops, to my Mom, to the head shrinkers she's probably calling right now. That serum we were given yesterday, I think it changed us. We're altered, different. Maybe the drug woke something, some latent ability within each of us. I can sense what people are feeling and I can influence those feelings a little."

"What next? Spoon-bending and shit?"

"I have a feeling that's going to be Peter's gift-moving things with his mind."

Kat wasn't sure what to make of this. She noticed Alex smiling. "What's so funny?"

"You don't believe me."

"Can you blame me?"

"Not really," Alex agreed. "But it's hard to deny some pretty weird shit has been happening to us since we got injected with that serum."

"Ain't that the fucking truth?" Kat looked at the Zen garden, studying the swirls and patterns in the white pebbles. "What about me? What's my thing?"

Alex shrugged. "You'll know that better than me. Last night, when we were all having nightmares, each of us got a glimpse of what we can do. What did you see when you fell asleep?"

"The TV switched itself on in my room," Kat replied with a grin.

"I don't think you've become a human remote control."

"Yeah, but wouldn't that make life easier?" Kat said with a smile, before thinking back to her nightmare again. She told Alex what had happened, moment by moment. "The tattoos on my skin, they were trying to kill me. Then you came in and woke me up just in time."

Alex rose from the bench and walked into the garden, crouching on one of the stepping-stones so she could run her hands through the tiny pebbles. "When the nightmare started, you were watching yourself on TV?"

"While the tattoos were coming to life, yeah."

"Then you were floating above your body, watching it being throttled."

"At first it was the snakes from my nightmare. Then it was just me, dying."

Alex stopped moving her hand. "Each time you were watching, seeing things, visions, things that were going to happen or that did happen."

"But you stopped it when you woke me up," Kat pointed out.

"Only because Krueger sent me to save you." Alex stood up. "You saw your own death. That must be your ability, seeing the future: precognition."

"What, like a fortune teller at the carnival?" Kat snorted in disbelief. "Next you'll be saying I should buy a crystal ball or play solitaire with Tarot cards. I might look like the queen of Goth, but I can't stand all that shit."

"Fuck!" Alex was staring at the patterns she had made in the white sand.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Kat asked, before her gaze dropped down to the ground. Written in the sand were two words: YOU'RE MINE. "Oh, shit."

"A message from Krueger," Alex said angrily. "The bastard is using us.

"Bastard is right," another voice interjected. Peter was standing at the entrance to the garden. Behind him Chris and Heather could be seen walking toward them too. "Fred Krueger was the bastard son of a hundred maniacs. You won't believe some of the twisted shit this guy has pulled."

***

Peter had spent the morning researching their tormentor. Once all five were gathered outside the hospital, he told them what he had uncovered as they strolled through the grounds. "My dad's still got my computer locked away in the garage so I thought I'd try Springwood Library. The computer there was on the fritz so I resorted to some old-fashioned research methods and hit the stacks," he explained.

"And?" Heather asked.

"Nothing. Not a mention of Krueger anywhere: not in the county records, not in the register of births or deaths, and nothing in the newspaper archives. But I did find gaps where he should have been."

"What do you mean?"

"Pages missing from bound volumes. Sections on microfiche files blacked out. Whole editions of court records missing. It was as if somebody had been systematically trying to delete every reference to the name Fred Krueger, and succeeding."

Chris shook his head. "Peter, you've got conspiracy theories on the brain."

"I wish you were right," Peter insisted. "So get this. Springwood might be able to censor anything and everything about Krueger here, but the town can't censor the Internet, that's a worldwide resource. Individual rantings and online diaries, you can never destroy those completely. Even if the original web pages are taken down, search engines maintain cache files of past hits. So I went to the 'net café at the mall and did some digging." He reached into a duffel bag and produced pages of printouts, giving a set each to the others. "This is what I copied before the café owner saw it and threw me out."

The first few pages were extracts from an online journal kept by a girl who called herself Lori. She had lived in Springwood and mentioned having bad dreams and nightmares about a monster with knives for fingers. The final excerpt gave the creature a name: Krueger. "He killed Trey. I think he killed Blake as well, and Blake's dad. He wants me; he wants to do things to me. I'm scared, so scared. I wish Will was here, he would hold me and say everything was going to be okay. I'm not sure I can ever go home again." Pictured beside the entry was a low-res image of Lori's home. The exterior was painted in different colors from how it looked now, but the building was still unmistakable, as was the number on the front door: 1428.

"Jesus, she lived in my house!" Alex gasped.

Peter remained grim-faced. "Keep reading, there's more."

Alex turned to the final page, a copy of the summary from a psychiatric assessment written nearly twenty years earlier. "Where did you find this?"

"Somebody uploaded their thesis on to the web. It's a study of Ohio's psychiatric treatment methods in the mid-1980s. This page was among the appendices."

Alex began reading the summary. It did not name the patient, but the details of their alleged delusion had a familiar element. "Subject claims she is being stalked in her dreams by a creature called Krueger, who attacks people in their nightmares. Subject believes if she dies in her dreams, she will never wake up. Strength of delusion is remarkable, as is the depth of its invention. Krueger is supposedly a child molester and murderer who returns from beyond the grave seeking revenge. Subject claims Krueger was the son of a nun raped repeatedly by a hundred psychiatric patients at a local asylum after the war. Subject displays classic signs of insomnia-related psychosis. Strong sedatives have been prescribed in the hope of easing her symptoms."

There was a hand-written addendum visible at the foot of the summary. "Subject deceased. Found dead in padded cell, as a result of severe blood loss. Subject had apparently bitten through her own wrists and used the blood from the wounds to write a nursery rhyme

on the walls: 'One, two, Freddy's coming for you. Three, four, better lock your door. Five, six, grab a crucifix...' Blood supply ran out before subject could complete the rhyme. A regrettable lapse by night staff. New precautions to be instituted to prevent reccurrence. Case closed and sealed, at request of the director."

Alex shivered when she reached the section about the nursery rhyme, as if someone was walking over her grave. The verse was the same one she'd written while having a daydream in class on Thursday.

Peter waited until everyone had finished reading before speaking again. "So I guess we know what we're up against."

"Why did he choose us?" Heather asked, a hysterical edge to her voice. "I don't want to end up like this girl, locked up in a rubber room, waiting for Krueger to finish me off!" She burst into tears. Chris gave her a hug, one hand stroking Heather's blonde hair, trying to comfort her.

"He picked me first," Alex said. "He was in my nightmare before we went to the Katja Institute. It must be the house, something about my house that attracts him, that lets him get inside our minds."

"What about the serum?" Kat wondered. "None of us have been in your house, yet we saw Krueger in our dreams after they injected us with the serum."

"Lloyd had been injected with the drug before," Peter recalled. "He talked the rest of us into going for the trial. The two things must be linked."

"We need to know more about that serum," Alex decided. "Maybe there's an antidote, or some way of reversing its effects."

"Morpheus Pharmaceuticals is gone." Chris announced. "I went to the Katja Institute first thing this morning. Kerry and Deuer, they flew back east last night. Morpheus was only renting space at the institute for the length of the trials, no more. I tried calling their office in New York but the number is out of service. Both doctors have unlisted home phone numbers. It'll take days before we can track them down, if we ever do."

Heather wiped away her tears. "What about Lloyd's friend Luke? He's local, maybe he can help us."

"Luke is dead," Kat replied. "I saw it on the news this morning. Local man dies in tragic car crash. The cops think he fell asleep at the wheel. It happened when we were all having our nightmares. That could be a coincidence."

"Or not." Peter rubbed his forehead. "Shit, we're on our own with this. The cops don't want to hear the name Krueger, our parents think we're going psycho, and nobody else is going to believe a word we say. We're fucked."

"Maybe not," Alex said. She told them what she had told Kat, her theory about the serum and its effects.

Chris shook his head. "You expect us to believe that shit?" he asked, laughing bitterly.

"Just because you're afraid, don't take it out on Alex," Kat snapped. "If I'd told you about Krueger three days ago, would you have believed me?"

"No, but—"

"But nothing. Give her a chance, okay?"

Chris glared at Kat, but eventually relented. "Okay."

Alex sighed. "Look, I'm not claiming I know all the answers, or why this is happening to us, or even how. But I sense something has changed, has been—I don't know—awakened inside us."

Chris rolled his eyes. "Yeah? Like what?"

Alex stepped in front of Chris, confronting him. "That fire in your bedroom last night. How did it start?"

"I don't know. I caught fire in my nightmare."

"But you didn't burn, did you?"

"I don't see what—"

"Your bedroom got burnt to a crisp but you didn't get so much as a heat rash, did you?" Alex demanded, her eyes staring at Chris.

"No," he said, unable to hold her gaze. "I didn't."

"What about me?" Heather asked. "I don't feel any different."

Peter had an answer for that. "When we were in my bedroom, you said you could hear my thoughts from five blocks away. I was screaming in your head."

Heather winced. "Don't remind me, I've still got the headache."

"You have some sort of psychic ability," Peter said. "You can hear what other people are thinking, and maybe even communicate to them with your mind."

"He's right," Alex realized. "Can you do it now, Heather?"

"No, thank God," she replied. "It must only happen when one of us is dreaming. Just as well, I think the voices would drive me mad otherwise. I've heard a few whispers this morning, but I can block those out, I guess."

"I suppose you've got a theory to explain that too?" Chris asked Alex.

Kat stepped between the two of them, pushing Chris backward. "Leave her alone, asshole! She's only trying to make sense of all this. You might be king of the basketball court, but you're shit-scared like the rest of us. Stop taking it out on Alex, or else."

"Or else what?" he snarled, squaring up to Kat.

"Stop it. Both of you." Alex shouted. "This is what Krueger wants, don't you understand? He wants us fighting each other, divided, tearing ourselves apart. That's how he wins."

Heather stepped in and pulled Chris to one side, while Peter persuaded Kat to back down. Alex waited while tempers cooled a little, using the time to recall something from her dream journey into the boiler room.

"Last night, Krueger claimed he owned us, said we were his possessions," she said. "He called us his playthings, his disciples. The dreams we all had: they were a game, a test. I think that bastard's got plans for us. These new abilities of ours, they're part of it."

"How can you know all this?" Chris demanded.

"I don't, I'm guessing," she snapped back at him. "If you got any better suggestions, spit them out."

Chris shook his head. "Forget it. I've listened to enough shit for one day, I'm outta here. Heather, you coming?" She nodded, smiling apologetically to Alex. Heather took Chris's hand and they walked away from the others.

Peter watched the pair leaving. "I'll go after them," he told Kat and Alex, "and see if I can't talk any sense into Chris. Like you said, he's scared. If I can get him to think again, Heather probably will too."

"Whatever," Alex said, shaking her head. Peter ran off, leaving Kat and Alex outside the hospital.

"Sorry I started shouting," Kat said. "Probably didn't help matters."

Alex shrugged. "We've got to stick together. It's our only chance against Krueger. I can feel it in my bones."

Kat gestured toward the hospital. "Since we're here, you wanna go in and see how Lloyd is doing?"

"Hospitals creep me out. Just the smell of antiseptic..." Alex folded her arms together, hugging herself. Kat recognized the body language.

"How long did they keep you in?"

Alex's brow furrowed. "How did you...?"

"The cuts on your arms, remember? I spent three weeks in Westin Hills after my parents caught me putting out the cigarette butts on myself."

"A month. I spent a month in a psychiatric hospital right before my fifteenth birthday." Alex shuddered at the memory and then folded the pages Peter had brought and stuffed them into a pocket. "Come on, let's go see Lloyd."

Kat led the way through the gardens toward the hospital. "If he's still in a coma, at least he shouldn't be feeling any pain," she said hopefully.

"I wouldn't count on that," Alex muttered.

***

It was Heather's idea to go to the mall. After the last few days, some retail therapy and a trip to the movies sounded like heaven next to nightmares and fingerknives. Chris eventually agreed and Peter tagged along, saying he didn't want to be left behind. Heather hit the make-up counter while the two boys checked out some running shoes in Foot Locker. Chris went straight for the basketball section, admiring a pair of black and white Converse All-Stars. "Now this is old school," he said appreciatively. "Can you believe professionals used to play in these?"

Peter was more interested in four teenagers causing trouble at one of the checkouts. One guy had two black eyes and a bandage across his nose. "Look. Johnston's been let out of his cage for the day and he's brought his goon squad with him to the mall."

Chris shook his head dismissively. "Somebody should teach those fools some manners."

"Good idea," Peter murmured. He left Chris and moved closer to the checkouts to observe Johnston. The blond bully was hitting on a teenage girl, trying to peer down the inside of her uniform, one of his hands snaking around her hips. The rest of the gang was goading him on, all the while blocking what was happening from the other staff in the store.

"Leave me alone!" the girl protested.

"Why should I?" Johnston smirked, one of his hands cupping her left breast as he read the nametag on her uniform. "Who's gonna stop me, Christina?"

Peter remembered Alex's suggestion about the serum giving him the ability to move objects with his mind. She seemed to believe that would be strongest during dreaming, but maybe it could still work while he was awake. I don't know if I believe her, he thought, but this is a good chance to try it. In his nightmare he had reached out with his mind and pushed. Peter focused his gaze on the electronic till beside Johnston. The bully's hand was lingering in front of the drawer, clinging to Christina's side. Peter concentrated all his thoughts on the checkout and *shoved*. The drawer suddenly flew outward, slamming into Johnston's hand and crushing his fingers.

"Aghhh! Fuck, my hand!" Johnston shouted, tearing the damaged digits away from Christina. She was as shocked as him, jumping away from the till. "You did that deliberately." Johnston snarled at her. She shook her head, unable to explain what had happened.

Peter noticed a stack of tubes stuffed with tennis balls to one side of the counter. Imagine if those burst open, he thought to himself, it would be like cannon fire inside the store. He smiled and gave the tubes a *push*. Within moments the meatheads were bombarded by flying tennis balls; guided missiles thudding into their faces and groins. Johnston's goons decided to retreat and stumbled from the

store, two of them upended on their way out by a collection of baseball bats spilling beneath their feet.

Only Johnston remained behind, glaring around the store, trying to find the cause of his embarrassment. "Who's doing this? Who's the little shit that thinks they can take me on?" he shouted. "I'll show them who's the boss!" Peter couldn't resist a final swipe at Johnston's dignity. As the burly bully stormed from the store, he failed to notice the tennis racquet grasped by a mannequin near the doors. One last nudge and the racquet swung sideways, the edge of its frame smacking into Johnston's already broken nose. Blood gushed from both nostrils, soaking the front of his clean white T-shirt.

***

Feline was the coolest store at the mall: a high fashion boutique with the most cutting edge clothing in Springwood. That probably wasn't saying much, Heather thought to herself, but only the trendiest students shopped there. She had ventured inside and found the perfect top, a daring sheath of fabric with two ties threaded up either side of the garment. If you tugged on them it would tighten the material to a perfect fit, clinging in all the right places. The price was exorbitant, but her mom had given Heather a charge card last birthday and this was the perfect chance to abuse it. She chose a black version of the top and headed for the changing rooms, selecting a cubicle near the door.

Once inside Heather slipped out of her cropped T-shirt and into the top. The tailoring was exquisite for something off the rack. She had to have it. Heather reluctantly took it off and was pulling her own T-shirt back on when three giggling voices entered the changing area. "Did you hear about Little Miss Sutherland? The principal's favorite princess is getting suspended for cutting classes yesterday. The bitch will never be crowned prom queen after pulling a stunt like that. I can't wait to see her face on Monday when she hears the news."

Heather opened the cubicle door a fraction and peered out. Three girls from her class had come in, all carrying versions of the same top

she had chosen. Leader of the pack was Simone Myers, the bitchiest student at school and Heather's main competition for the title of prom queen. Simone laughed and her acolytes dutifully giggled along with her. Drones, Heather thought sourly. Hyenas like Simone always hunt in packs. Heather had seen that on the Discovery Channel once. And what kind of name was Simone, anyway? In Ohio? Give me a break. Gossip in the hallways suggested her real first name was Mildred, but she changed it before transferring to Springwood High last year.

Simone stepped into the cubicle next to Heather and took off her shirt. "Sutherland didn't stand a chance against me in the voting anyway, and did you see what she's been wearing this week?" The other two giggled their agreement. "And I think she's putting on weight too!" Simone sneered. "Next thing you know she'll be pregnant. I've always said that girl was only one generation away from poor white trash. I mean," she paused for effect, "look at her mother."

Heather could feel her blood pressure rising. God, I'd love to tell Simone what I really think of her! *You stuck-up, self-important, delusional hag!*

"What did you two call me?" Simone demanded.

"We didn't say anything," they protested meekly.

"I heard somebody just call me a stuck..." Simone's voice trailed off. "Never mind, must have imagined it."

Heather clamped a hand over her own mouth to stop from laughing out loud. Simone had heard what she was thinking, but that was impossible, wasn't it? Unless Alex was right. There was only one way to find out.

Simone's braying voice was talking again. "What was I saying? Oh yeah—"

You were talking out of your ass, as usual, bitch.

"That's it!" Simone ripped open the door of her cubicle. "Who is it? Who's out here, saying things about me?"

"What things? What are you talking about?" her friends asked warily.

"I heard someone say I was talking out... Well anyway, it was abusive," Simone flustered. "You two didn't hear anyone else's voice?"

"No, Simone," the girls replied.

They're too scared to say how ugly you look in that skirt.

"There it is again!"

They think you look like a pig in heat, and they're right.

"Stop it! Get out of my head!"

One more thing, it's time to get that moustache of yours taken care of. You look more like a male gym teacher than a prom queen.

Simone stormed out of the changing rooms, followed by her two cronies. Heather held back her laughter until she was alone, then burst into hysterics.

***

It took Alex and Kat more than an hour to discover where the hospital was keeping Lloyd. After a long, bitter argument with the staff at the ICU, Alex and Kat eventually found out he had been transferred to the burns unit. The two women navigated the hospital's bewildering internal layout to the appropriate quarter, hidden away in an annex at the rear of the building. As they neared the double doors leading into it, Kat started to shiver uncontrollably.

"What is it?" Alex asked. "What's wrong?"

"Can't you see it?" Kat gasped, her trembling hands clasped together. One finger pointed at the entrance.

Alex examined the double doors but could see nothing wrong. The frames were made of wood, each inset with glass panels reinforced by an embedded wire mesh. A keypad beneath the doors controlled entry to the unit, with a call button and intercom above that. Beyond the entrance was a long, narrow corridor with doors leading off on either side. The sour bite of antiseptic filled the air but Alex was getting used to that. "See what?" she asked. "I don't understand."

"He's in there," Kat hissed. "Krueger is in there!

TEN

To Kat, Krueger's presence was obvious. Looking at the annex was like staring at a building constructed entirely from pieces of their tormentor. To her eyes the door handles were like a pair of clasping talons, twisted fingerknives curled into balls of metal. The linoleum floor was a succession of dirty red and green stripes, stretching along the corridor. The glass panels in the doors were his eyes, staring, searching and probing for a glimpse of his next victim. And the walls? They were his ribcage, home to a malevolent heart, tendrils of evil creeping out to touch, to corrupt, to infest. Krueger wasn't inside the burns unit—he *was* the burns unit.

Kat tried to explain all of this to Alex, but she could tell her friend was having problems grasping what she was saying. "Please, I can't go in there," Kat said. "Don't make me go in there. I can't face it... I can't face *him*."

Alex nodded. "Why don't you wait out here? I'll go in and see how Lloyd is doing. If you feel any better, come inside and join me."

Kat knew that wouldn't happen, but she appreciated the offer. "Be careful in there," she warned. "Everything is not what it seems here." Alex led her to a bench of wood and metal opposite the entrance. Kat sat down and sighed. Already Krueger's image was fading, the threat of his presence diminishing.

"I'll be as quick as I can," Alex said. Kat nodded and leaned back against the wall, exhausted by what she had seen. Alex pushed the call button by the double doors. An orderly with a kindly face appeared. He had gray hair and a stomach that gently bulged over his hospital issue pants. When he activated the intercom Alex asked if Lloyd Reeves was a patient inside.

The orderly opened the door and smiled at her. "Come on in. Lloyd hasn't had any visitors yet. Maybe you can help. The sound of a familiar voice sometimes nudges patients out of a coma."

"Thanks," Alex said, surprised to be welcomed for once. "We've been getting the runaround everywhere else in the hospital today."

"I'll bet," the orderly said, offering to shake her hand. He held a wickedly long pair of scissors in his other hand, along with a folded sheet of newspaper cut into a shape of a snowflake. "I'm Roy. Sorry, you caught me making decorations for a birthday party for one of our younger patients. Ignore all the security; it got put in as a safety measure after a baby was snatched from maternity last year. Like anyone's going to steal a patient from the burns unit!" He chuckled before noticing Kat on the bench nearby. "Does your friend want to come in too?"

Kat smiled and shook her head. "No thanks. I'm... a bit squeamish.

"We get that a lot," Roy said. "Well, let's go see Lloyd." The pair walked away along the corridor. Kat watched them go, suppressing a yawn. The atmosphere inside the hospital was stifling. Right now I could do with a cigarette, Kat thought to herself. The familiar, insistent craving for nicotine was crawling across her skin like an insect, a cockroach scrabbling for a foothold on her resolve. But the hospital operated a strict no smoking policy. Shame, I could have kept myself awake by putting cigarettes out on my skin.

***

Chris, Heather and Peter were sitting in a deserted movie theater at the mall's multiplex. All the hit movies had sold out so they were stuck watching a subtitled French film about degradation during the German occupation of Paris. "A searing indictment of man's inhumanity to man, filled with unforgettable imagery and highly moving performances." That was what had been written on the poster outside the box office. "An ass-numbing pile of pretentious, arty crap," was Chris's less forgiving assessment.

Not for the first time did Chris suggest that they sneak into the next screen, but Heather refused to listen. The audience in the adjoining cinema could be heard cheering and whooping through the wall. By comparison the three of them were the only ones watching a bunch of beret-wearing depressives worry about where their next baguette was coming from. Chris couldn't remember when he'd been

so bored. Even double-period English with Mr Mycroft after lunch on a Wednesday was better than this torture.

Chris dug his hand into the bucket of popcorn they were sharing but it was empty. Screw this, he decided. "I'm going to get an ice cream. Does anybody else want something?" The other two waved him away so Chris stomped out of the screening room and along to the candy counter. He studied the thirty-three flavors of ice cream on offer. Where did they come up with these names? Candy Apple Gray, Cupid and Psyche, Blood and Thunder. I mean, who wants to eat a scoop of Blood and Thunder? Gross. An attendant in a red and green striped apron was behind the freezer adjusting the thermostat. "Hey, can I get some service here?" Chris asked.

The attendant stood up and smiled. It was Lloyd. His skinless face glistened beneath the harsh overhead lighting. "Hey, dude. How can I help you?" A single drip of thick, congealing blood hung from the tip of his bony nose. Lloyd absentmindedly scratched at the muscles visible on one side of his face, his fingers gouging at the tissue. "We got all the usual flavors today, plus a few surprises."

"Lloyd? What are you doing here?"

"Got a Saturday job, man. Hospital bills don't pay themselves, you know." Lloyd sniffed and the drop of blood fell from his nose into the Cherry Paella tub.

"Yeah, but you shouldn't be out of bed. I mean, look at your face."

Lloyd sighed. "Has it fallen off again? Fuck's sake, man!" Lloyd searched the tubs of ice cream, retrieving a bloody flap of skin from Mock-a-choc-a-holica and pressing it back on to his skull. "Now, what can I tempt you with, dude?"

Chris backed away from the display. "I've kinda gone off ice cream. Coach says I should stay away from junk food."

"Don't be worried about your diet, man! You're in a dream; calories don't count here. It's all good, know what I'm saying?" Lloyd smiled broadly, as his face began peeling off once more. "Duh! Here we go again."

***

Roy led Alex to the last room in the burns unit, pausing outside the wooden door. "We're full up, otherwise we don't normally use this room," he confided.

"Why not?"

"Most families refuse to have their loved ones stay in here. A child murderer once spent his last hours in this room. He'd been burned alive. God knows how he didn't die in that fire. The bastard clung to life for three days and nights before the doctors finally pulled the plug." Roy grimaced. "Sorry, I know I shouldn't talk like that about a patient. But the things this guy had done... Like I said, most people refuse to even come inside this room."

"That must have been what Kat saw," Alex mused aloud. "Krueger."

"That was his name," Roy confirmed. "Krueger. Most people don't remember anymore, just the stories about him."

"Why do you?"

"It was my first day as an orderly at the hospital, I was only seventeen. You never forget your first burns victim. It's not the sight so much as the smell."

Krueger must have left a tiny fragment of his black soul in this place, Alex decided, impregnated it with his evil and that's what freaked out Kat. Roy cleared his throat to get her attention, his hand resting on the door handle to the room.

"I should warn you, Lloyd does not look his best at the moment."

"That's okay," she said. "I was there when he... you know."

"Right. Well, in you go." Roy pushed the door open. "I'll be in my office if you need me. Just hit the big red call button over the bed."

"Thanks." Alex stepped inside and let the door close behind her. Lloyd's room was small and square, a single chair and the bed its only furniture. The walls were bare but for the call button and a large picture window looking over the grounds outside. Life support machines clustered round Lloyd, monitoring his condition via numerous tubes and wires attached to his body. Alex walked around the bed and sat in the lone chair beneath the window.

Lloyd's head was swathed in bandages and tubes emerged from his nostrils and mouth. His pale, emaciated body was clad in a white

hospital gown, the limbs constantly twitching and shaking. His fingers clenched and unclenched, hands jumping from the sheets before relaxing again. Restraining straps had been secured across Lloyd's chest to prevent him moving any further. His whole body was tensed, as if preparing to fight or flee. An intravenous drip pierced one arm, providing sustenance, while a tube emerged from beneath the sheets, draining other fluids away. He looked helpless and alone.

"Why do this to him, Krueger?" Alex whispered. "What harm has he ever done to you?"

She reached for Lloyd's hand and held it in her own, trying to soothe away the spasms and twitching. As Alex stroked the back of his hand, she felt herself being drawn toward him: not her body, but her spirit. She tensed, ready to fight back. *Help me*, a voice whispered in her mind. *Please, help me*.

"Lloyd? Is that you?"

Please…

"Alright." Alex closed her eyes and lowered her defenses, letting herself be drawn closer to the voice, letting herself become one with it. When she opened her eyes again, Alex was back at the Katja Institute, in the room where they had been injected with the serum, lying on the same bed as before. She sat up and looked around. Lloyd was the only other person in the room, swinging his legs back and forth over the side of his bed like a small boy. His face was normal, his clothes the usual shambling, crumpled mess.

"Hey, I thought you'd never get here."

Alex left her bed and walked over to him. "You feeling better?"

"Here, I'm fine," he said, tapping a finger against his forehead. "But this is all in here. Out in the real world, I ain't looking so hot."

"Yeah. Why'd you bring me here?"

"I didn't," Lloyd replied sadly. "He did."

"Hello, Alex. A pleasure to see you again."

"Krueger," she spat, spinning round to face the murderer. He was smirking at her, his face a leering smile of evil. "What do you want from me? From us?"

"That would be telling. You'll find out soon enough."

"I've had enough of your fucking mind games, asshole. I want to know."

"You want?" The amusement drained from Krueger's features. He strode toward her, his good hand grabbing the front of her T-shirt while the blades on his other hand drew back, ready to kill. "I don't give a shit about what you want!"

"You gonna kill me?" Alex shouted back. "Then go ahead, kill me! Don't leave me in suspense, cocksucker. Let's get this over with!"

Krueger's gloved hand twitched, then relaxed, dropping to his side. "Not yet. You belong to me, bitch. I choose when you die and how you same die. The goes for all your little friends."

"You don't scare me," Alex snarled. "I know who you are. You couldn't get your kicks like a real man, you had to go after children. You make me sick, you twisted fuck. You're nothing. You're shit." She spat in his face.

He sniggered in response. "I've heard those words before. They don't have any power here. This is my domain." The scar-faced monster stuck out his tongue and licked the spittle from his face, swallowing it. "Hmm, juicy. What about you, Alex? You proved you can spit, but do you like to swallow?"

"Fuck you!" she screamed at Krueger.

He snapped his gloved hand up to her face, pressing the edge of a blade close to Alex's left eye. She gasped, unable to suppress her terror. "I thought I couldn't scare you?"

Alex twisted sideways to look for Lloyd, but he was walking out of the room. "Don't leave me here."

"Sorry, but I've got my own battles to fight," he said. "Catch you later."

***

Kat yawned and shook her head. This was the last place in the world she wanted to fall asleep. She got up and approached the burns unit's double doors. The presence of Krueger had been a specter before, a ghost touching every part of this place, but now he was gone, and she could no longer sense him nearby. Kat pressed the call

button and Roy came back to the doors, opening them for her. "Changed your mind?"

Kat nodded. "Alex can do with my support, I guess." "Good for you. It's the last door on the left."

"Thanks." Kat strolled along the corridor, pausing to glance inside the rooms on either side. The patients were a mixture of adults and children, each with bandages and gauze covering the injured areas of their bodies. Nothing here was pretty but that was the nature of a burns unit. It was about getting better. She reached the last door on the left and knocked quietly. "Alex? You in there?" No reply came, so Kat opened the door and looked inside.

There were two figures by the bed, each holding one of Lloyd's hands. Alex was sitting in a chair on the far side of the room, her eyes closed, head nodding forward slightly as though she were dozing off. The other figure stood opposite Alex, a shadowy blur surrounded by darkness. Kat frowned. What the fuck? Alex is sitting there in broad daylight and this other person is—

She gasped as the shadowy figure drew back its spare hand, a pair of scissors clutched in the fist, ready to stab down into Lloyd's chest. "No, don't!" Kat screamed, throwing herself at the figure. But her arms passed through the shadow, never touching it. The scissors plunged down and buried themselves in Lloyd's flesh. He cried out in agony, fingers clawing at the wound, before sinking back on to the mattress, his eyes glassy and lifeless. Kat blinked and the attacker was gone, as if erased from the moment. She returned to the door and shouted for Roy.

Behind her the shadowy blur shimmered back into existence, standing over Lloyd's body. Kat watched as it reached for his hand and clasped it. The attacker's other hand pulled back, again clutching the scissors, then stabbed them into Lloyd's chest. Once he had finished twitching, the figure faded away. "Roy!" Kat called. "Roy, get in here! I need you to see this!"

The bedside scene played itself out, over and over again, the same movements, the same mixture of tenderness and brutality, the same horrific result. Kat peered at the blurred figure of Lloyd's killer, but could not make out any details. Just the scissors, the hands, the

violence. She knew there was something familiar about them, but what was it? Kat leaned out the doorway again. "Roy! Where the fuck are you?"

"Roy's busy," Krueger whispered in Kat's ear. "Will I do?" He gestured at the sequence replaying itself by the bed. "Friends of yours?"

"Fuck you, Krueger!" Kat yelled, trying to push past him.

The gloved hand grabbed her arm, fingerknives closing around her wrist, slicing into the skin. Kat cried out in pain, dropping to her knees before him. "Show me a little respect, bitch!" Krueger twisted his blades sideways, gouging into the bones of her wrist. "Because I own you, all of you. Do as I say or I promise you pain everlasting." He reversed the angle of his fingerknives, scraping them back across her bones. Blood was pouring from Kat's wounds, running down her arm to the floor.

"This isn't real," she told herself. "It's only a nightmare. This isn't real!"

Krueger crouched beside her and chuckled. "Try telling that to Lloyd." He released Kat's arm and strolled across to Alex. She was still in the chair, seemingly oblivious to what was happening around her. Krueger touched her face with his good hand, stroking the features almost tenderly. He looked at Kat and smiled. "This little bitch is my favorite." His hand ventured down from Alex's face, sliding inside her T-shirt. "Tell Kat how much you want me," he whispered in Alex's ear. She began to moan softly.

"Yes," Alex breathed, biting on her bottom lip, another moan of pleasure escaping from her as Krueger caressed her. "Mmm, yes."

"Leave her alone!" Kat shouted at Krueger. Grasping the end of the bed, she pulled herself to her feet, the mutilated arm hanging uselessly at her side, blood still running from the wounds. "If you want to hurt somebody, hurt me!"

Krueger laughed at that. "All in good time."

***

Chris was shaken awake by Peter and Heather, their faces full of fear. "Come on, snap out of it! Before you torch *this* place!" Peter shouted.

"What are you talking about?" Chris said, yawning. "I must have dozed off..." His words failed as he looked around the theater. The seats immediately around them were on fire. "What the fuck happened?"

"You did," Heather replied. "You fell asleep during the movie. I didn't realize what was happening until the corn started popping."

"What?"

"All the unpopped corn on the floor," Peter explained. "The temperature in here kept rising and they started exploding. You boiled my milkshake and then the seats caught fire."

"That's when we realized it was you," Heather added. "Alex was right. You must have been dreaming."

"I was," Chris remembered. "Lloyd was serving ice cream and his face kept falling off." The fires on the seats had gone out, but their smoke was rising toward the ceiling. "Shit, we better get out of here. I'm in enough trouble as it is with my old man, I don't need—"

A fire alarm went off and the sprinkler system came to life, pumping gallons of water into the screening room. The trio scrambled for the exit, the indoor rainstorm soaking them to the skin. They emerged to find hundreds of other patrons doing the same thing, pouring out of the other screens, all of them wringing wet and bewildered.

Peter grabbed hold of Chris and Heather. "Let's get out of here before someone starts asking questions we don't want to answer."

"Good idea," Chris agreed. "Where?"

"My place," Heather volunteered. "Mom is playing bridge and downing gin with my aunt tonight. She gets wrecked most Saturdays and has to spend the night there."

"Sounds good to me," Chris said. "I'm in no rush to get home."

"Me neither," Peter added. "My dad's spoiling for another fight and I don't want to give him the satisfaction." The trio crossed the parking lot, the wail of approaching sirens hastening their progress.

***

Alex opened her eyes to see Kat standing over the hospital bed, a pair of scissors clutched in her hand, ready to stab them down into Lloyd's chest. "Kat, no! Don't do it!" Alex shouted. The other girl stopped, blinking her eyes as if waking from a dream. Alex hurried to where Kat was poised, gently taking the scissors from her grasp.

"What happened?" Kat asked, her voice heavy and tired.

"You must have been sleepwalking. I thought you were going to stab Lloyd with these." Alex showed her the scissors.

"No, it wasn't me. I saw somebody doing that, over and over, but it wasn't me. Somebody else kills Lloyd."

"What are you talking about?"

Kat blinked once more, her eyes becoming clearer. "I had another vision, a glimpse of the future. Somebody is going to murder Lloyd. He gets stabbed in the chest. In this room, in this bed."

"When?"

"I don't know. An hour? A day? A week? I know it's dark when this happens. The killer uses something with long blades."

"Like these scissors? Or was it Krueger's fingerknives?"

Kat frowned. "I'm not sure. But Krueger isn't the killer, I know that."

"Then who?"

"It's one of us, the five of us. One of us murders Lloyd."

"But why?" Alex demanded. "Why would any of us do that?"

"To save themselves?" Kat suggested. "Maybe Krueger forces them to do it, or tricks them into killing Lloyd, I don't know."

Alex shook her head, still unable to accept this prophecy. "Maybe you saw a dream."

Kat shook her head. "It was real, alright. But I couldn't see who the killer was." Her eyelids fluttered and she swayed on her feet. "I don't... don't feel well..." Kat looked at her right arm. The skin was split open and blood was gushing from the wound, spattering her top and the clean white bedding. Kat collapsed in Alex's arms, sliding to the floor, blood still spraying from her arm.

"Help!" Alex shouted. "We need a doctor. Help!" Kat's eyes rolled back into her head and her body went limp in Alex's arms. "Hold on, Kat, help is coming. Just try to hold on."

***

Alex opened her eyes again, this time jolting awake. She glanced hurriedly around the room, but there was no sign of Kat or blood or scissors. It had been another daydream, another nightmare within a nightmare, another one of Krueger's teases. Alex could sense that Kat was in danger. She must have fallen asleep too. I've got to wake her. Alex ran for the door but it would not open.

"Going somewhere?" Krueger asked. His face appeared on the displays of all the life support machines surrounding Lloyd. "And I was so looking forward to getting to know you better."

"Fuck you! Let me out of here, Kat needs me."

Krueger shrugged. "Why should I care about that whore?"

"I care about her, isn't that enough?"

"No. But it will make her death all the more painful for you, and all the more delicious for me," Krueger smirked. "You better hurry, if you want to save the slut." His face faded away and the door unlocked itself. Alex wrenched it open and sprinted along the corridor to the entrance. As she ran Alex could see Kat outside the double doors, lying sideways on the bench, blood dripping from wounds on her right arm. Alex tugged on the doors but they wouldn't move.

"Roy." she shouted. "Roy, I need these doors open, now."

The overweight orderly looked out from his office. "What's wrong?"

Alex pointed at Kat. "My friend, I think she's bleeding to death out there!"

"Hit the white button." Roy shouted. "I'll call the paramedics." He ran back into his office. Alex slammed her fist on a button by the intercom and the doors swung open. She ran to Kat and lifted up the injured arm, applying pressure to the wounds. There were dozens of cuts on the arm, blood coursing from each one. With her spare hand

Alex slapped Kat's face, trying to snap her out of Krueger's control, to stop her dreaming

"Kat, come on, wake up. Don't let him win." she implored.

Roy returned from his office with armfuls of bandages and gauze, wrapping them around Kat's arm to staunch the blood loss. In less than a minute paramedics ran into view, pushing a gurney. They took over from Roy and Alex, asking quick fire questions to find out what had happened.

"I don't know," Alex admitted. "She was waiting out here while I visited a friend. When I came back out, she looked like this."

"Is she on any medication?"

"Hypnocil, the dream suppressant, but her dosage must have run out."

The paramedics consulted with each other in terse sentences and comments, a flurry of facts and figures that bewildered Alex. Finally she lost patience. "Could you please tell me what's going on?"

"It looks like your friend tried to commit suicide. She's lost a lot of blood, but we got to her in time, thanks to you. We've got to get her to the emergency room. They can treat her properly there." With that the paramedics were running, pushing Kat away on the gurney.

Alex and Roy were left behind, both of them smeared with Kat's blood. A pool of it had gathered underneath the bench. Roy was shaking his head. "I don't understand. I looked out at least twice to make sure your friend was alright. She seemed to have dozed off, but I couldn't see any problem."

Alex noticed a shape in the pool of blood. She reached into it and pulled out a long pair of scissors, heavy red drops falling from the blades.

"Those are mine," Roy said. "How did they get out here? I always keep them in my office." His face paled. "You don't think she used those to... Oh my God."

"She wouldn't try to kill herself," Alex maintained. "I know what it looks like, but Kat wouldn't try to commit suicide. She's stronger than that. He must have got to her while she was asleep, cut her in a dream..." She stopped, realizing Roy was staring at her. "Sorry, just thinking out loud."

"You think somebody else did that to her?"

"Yes. The same person that ripped the skin from Lloyd's face."

"But you saw him do that to himself, you said so," the orderly recalled.

Alex was going to explain but stopped herself. "Sorry, I was... The shock of seeing her like that, I guess it was too much. Sorry."

Roy smiled at her. "Are you sure you're okay? I could call your folks, get them to come and pick you up?"

"No, that's okay. Thanks for all your help. I'm gonna go see how my friend is doing." Alex hurried in the same direction the paramedics had taken Kat, wishing she had a jacket to hide the blood soaking the front of her T-shirt. She checked her combat trousers. The bottle of Hypnocil was still in one of the pockets. I have to get some to Kat before the doctors sedate her, Alex realized. She saw a sign for the emergency room and quickened her pace.

***

Peter had never been inside a house that was so... pink. He and Chris were standing in the living room of Heather's home, still wet from their soaking at the multiplex, while she searched for towels and a change of clothes for herself. Every room in the house had pink walls, pink carpets or pink furniture. The air was thick with the cloying smell of rose petals and cinnamon

It was like no man had ever set foot inside the place; at least, no man from Peter's family. Where were the stinking socks, the pizza delivery boxes, the discarded cans from old six-packs of beer? Since his mother died, Peter had been doing all the housework as part of his chores. His father said cleaning and tidying wasn't man's work. When Peter questioned why he had to do it, his father had laughed bitterly. "You're not a man. Not a real one, anyway. Housework's all you're good for."

Fuck you too, Dad.

Peter tried to put the old man out of his thoughts without success. I doubt he's even noticed I'm not home yet. When there are no clean

plates or the milk cartons are all empty, then he might figure it out, maybe. I could be dead and he wouldn't give a shit.

Heather reappeared from upstairs, throwing towels to Peter and Chris. "Dry your hair with these. I'd offer you some clothes to change into but my mom burnt all dad's clothes after he took off."

Chris smiled. "Happy families, huh?"

"Not exactly."

"Is it okay if I call my folks? I left my cellular at home this morning and they'll be wondering where I am."

"Sure. It's down the hall," Heather said, pointing the way.

"Thanks." Chris left her and Peter alone in the living room.

"Nice place," Peter offered.

"You think?" Heather looked around the pink room. "It's always been a bit over the top for my taste, but Mom loves this space. Calls it her womb with a view. She spends most of the day in here, watching our neighbors and drinking her own weight in gin."

"My dad prefers beer, and plenty of it."

"Six-packs and Monday Night Football?"

Peter nodded. "Used to make me watch every game. He was going to get a scholarship to college to play football, but blew out his knee."

"And he was hoping you'd follow in his footsteps?"

"Yeah. Giving birth to a geek wasn't in the game plan."

Heather sighed. "I've been on the beauty pageant circuit since I was four. Singing lessons, dancing lessons, elocution, deportment, costume fittings, beauty treatments, don't eat too much, don't bite your fingernails, don't cut your hair, on and on, forever and ever. Amen."

"I always thought you liked all that... attention."

"I hate it. I want to scream, tell her to leave me alone. I don't want to be her, don't want to relive her life. I want one of my own." Heather laughed. "I've always envied people like you at school."

"Why?" Peter asked.

"You can do what you want. You don't have to be on show 24/7, don't have to always look your best." Heather stopped abruptly, one hand covering her mouth. "Sorry, I didn't mean that to sound like..."

Peter waved away her embarrassment. "It's okay. Really. Being a geek does have its advantages, I guess. But you don't get humiliated by assholes like Joey Johnston on a daily basis. You don't come home to a beating from your old man after his team has lost and he's had one sixpack too many. You don't hide in your bedroom where your only friends live on a computer screen."

Chris's voice could be heard in the hallway, shouting on the phone. Heather pushed the door closed, shutting out what was being said. "The grass is always greener, huh?"

"Guess so," Peter agreed. He looked at his watch. It was six o'clock. "You sure your mom won't be coming home tonight?"

"I can guarantee it. Saturday night is party night. She expects me to be out making myself popular with all the right boys."

"You mean she...?"

Heather grimaced. "My mom's got a pretty warped set of values. Fuck yourself happy, that's how she described her philosophy of life to me once. I think I was twelve at the time and had found her in bed with some loser. No wonder Dad left when he did. I wish he'd taken me with him."

Chris came back into the room, his face red and angry. He jerked a thumb back at the phone in the hall. "You catch any of that?"

"Not the detail, only the volume," Heather said.

"Sorry."

"That's okay," she replied, resting a hand on Chris's shoulder. "Parents."

"Yeah. It's my life, not his. We're so disappointed in you, Christopher. You're bringing shame and disgrace upon this family. Come home now and we might find it in our hearts to forgive you." Chris stared at the floor. "Asshole. I've got a good mind to stay out all night. Then we'll see who's in charge."

"You're welcome to stay here," Heather offered, her hand still lingering on his shoulder. Peter shifted uncomfortably. "Both of you are." Heather added.

"I'm not sure..." Peter said.

"Stay," Chris urged. "That way we can keep each other awake, look out for each other. It's safer than being alone."

"You're probably right," Peter conceded.

"It'll be great," she enthused. "We'll order pizza, watch some DVDs."

"Okay," Peter said. "But no scary movies. I've had enough blood and horror to last me a lifetime."

ELEVEN

Alex was sitting beside Kat's bed when the tattooed teenager regained consciousness. Kat's right arm was heavily bandaged, while an intravenous drip was restoring lost fluids to her body. Alex had managed to slip Kat the Hypnocil before the doctors sedated her. Later, a kindly nurse told Alex a little about Kat's condition. "She lost a lot of blood. Much more and I doubt we'd have been able to save her. As for the injuries to her arm... I've seen a lot of suicide attempts before but nothing like that. There were so many cuts that they needed dozens of stitches. She'll be scarred for life, there's nothing we can do about that."

"What do mean, about the cuts?"

"Your friend wrote a message on her arm."

"A message?" Alex knew the cuts had been made by Krueger or, at least, made under his direction. "What was it?"

"It said '1 down—5 to go'. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No, no idea. I'll have to ask Kat."

"Well, she's been sedated so you'll have to wait a few hours."

That was mid-afternoon. Now it was dark outside the hospital windows, and streetlights cast strange shadows on the roads and sidewalks outside.

"Another groovy Saturday night in Springwood," Kat murmured as she came round, noticing Alex at her bedside. "How the fuck did I end up in here?"

"You don't remember?"

"I'm not sure. It's getting so I can't tell the nightmares and reality apart. I remember waiting for you outside the burns unit. Then I decided to go inside, see how you and Lloyd were doing."

"You never came in. At least, not while I was awake. You did show up in one of my nightmares while I was with Lloyd."

"No, you were in one of mine," Kat insisted. "You were asleep. I saw Krueger cop a feel of you. He likes you, Alex. He said you were his favorite."

"Terrific. My own fan club with Krueger as founder member."

Kat looked down at her bandaged arm. "Could be worse."

"You almost bled to death," Alex said. She explained about how she and Roy had found Kat outside the burns unit and told her of the message from Krueger.

"1 down.' Do you think that meant me or Lloyd?"

"Lloyd, I guess," Alex decided. "Krueger knew I'd save you."

"So did I," Kat said. "I don't bleed to death, I choke in my sleep. It was in my vision and I know it's going to come true."

"You can't be sure."

"Yes, I can. Like I'm sure one of us will murder Lloyd in that room. I've already seen it happen, Alex. It's a matter of when that happens, not if." Kat smiled wanly. "Kinda strange, knowing how you're going to die. I mean, we're all going to die one day, but you try to ignore that, put it to the back of your mind, pretend it isn't going to happen. We'd all be basket cases if we thought about it too much. But now I know it's almost here—fuck, there's so much I haven't done yet."

"You? I thought you'd done everything imaginable," Alex said.

"Don't believe the hype. I cultivated the image of being the biggest, baddest bitch in Springwood because it suited me. Nobody dare fuck with Kat Walker or she'll eat you alive. That kept me safe but it kept me apart too. Now it's too late to change. Much too late."

"Stop saying that," Alex insisted. "We can beat this bastard, you and me and the others. He doesn't have to win."

Kat shook her head. "You can beat him, Alex. I won't be that lucky."

A nurse came to check Kat's condition. "We're keeping you in tonight, to be safe. Is there anyone you'd like us to contact? Family members?"

Kat grimaced. "No way. The less they know about this, the better. They already think my soul is damned to hell anyway. I don't need their false sympathy."

"If that's what you want."

"It is," she replied firmly.

Once the nurse had gone, Alex couldn't resist asking a question. "Kat, why do you hate your family so much?"

"I don't hate them, I pity them. Their faith in God is so absolute, so certain, how can anything be that certain? It's blind faith. I almost envy them in a way. I'd love to have such complete belief in the afterlife. But I don't. The idea we'll all end up floating around in the clouds with God, being friends and having a great time for the rest of eternity, it doesn't sound credible to me. A lovely fairy tale to tell children when their hamster dies, but adults should know better. When I die, I know that's the end. Game over. Every thought, every feeling, every hope, every dream, everything I've ever been or done, it all dies with me." Kat looked away from Alex, her face taut and frightened. "And that scares the shit out of me."

"Maybe your family is right."

"I'm not that lucky," Kat said, almost smiling.

Alex noticed one of the tattoos on Kat's right arm above the bandages. Over a bleeding cross were the words JESUS IS COMING, while beneath that was written EVERYONE LOOK BUSY. She laughed out loud after reading the second half of the message. She explained why when Kat glared at her.

"Oh, that one. My first ink. Originally it was a normal cross and just said JESUS IS COMING. I thought my folks would be proud I wanted to show my faith to everyone in a tattoo. They freaked and said it was the devil's work. Years later I went back to the same parlor and had the rest added."

"And the barbed wire tattoos around your wrists?"

"I wanted a crown of thorns but that was the best I could get." Kat gave Alex a tour of her other tattoos: the snakes on her back, the angels on either thigh, the other motifs and messages displayed on her skin. "Strange to think they're going to kill me soon," she said. "Now I'm wishing I'd opted for hearts and flowers, not barbed wire and snakes. That would be less painful."

"You don't know your vision will come true," Alex insisted. "There's still a chance you're wrong. What if I went to the cops, told them what's happening?"

"Why should they believe you? Besides, we know they've covered up the truth about Krueger. We can't trust them."

"I could tell my mom," Alex suggested. "We don't agree on almost anything, but she only wants the best for me."

"Choosing to live at 1428 Elm Street wasn't a great start."

"Yeah. Besides, this would be too much for her. She already thinks I'm lapsing back into bad habits." Alex held up her arm where a dressing covered the wounds Krueger had made in her first nightmare. "If I try to tell Mom this was caused by a murderer who died two generations ago, a murderer now trying to kill me in my sleep..."

"Rubber room for Miss Corwin?"

"Yeah." Alex stifled a yawn. "Look, I've gotta go. That Hypnocil I gave you before will stop you dreaming for another twelve hours so you're safe tonight. Get some rest and I'll be back in the morning, okay?"

"Okay," Kat agreed. "You going home?"

"No. I need to find the others, need to talk to them. We can't face this freak Krueger on our own. Safety in numbers and all that."

"I'll see you tomorrow. Sweet dreams."

Alex shook her head. "Don't even joke about it."

***

Peter's worst fears were coming true. While he sat in a chair staring at the TV, Heather and Chris were snuggled together on the sofa. So far they'd watched two comedies and a thriller. Heather had suggested a slushy teen romance next and Peter was doing his best to stay awake, but could feel his eyelids drooping already. Chick flicks, the perfect cure for insomnia. Paper-thin plots, doe-eyed heroines and uplifting soundtracks. Barf-o-rama. For such a babe, Julia Stiles sure made some lame movies. Give me a good Clint Eastwood film any day, something with a bit of punch.

Peter got up, determined not to have another dream if he did fall asleep in front of this crap. "Heather, you got any more of those Hypnocil pills?"

"Upstairs in my bedroom," she said, lifting Chris's arm from around her shoulders so she could stand. "I'll go get them. We should

all have one, I guess."

Peter yawned as she left. "I'm gonna get a glass of water from the kitchen. You want anything, Chris?"

Chris stopped the DVD and shook his head. "Nah, I'm good." His attention was caught by basketball highlights on TV. "Hey, I wonder who won the state playoffs?"

Jocks, Peter thought despairingly as he went into the kitchen. We're being stalked by a dead homicidal maniac and Chris still wants to know the scores from today's games. Like that matters any more. Peter pulled two glasses from a cabinet above the sink and turned on the faucet, letting the water run a few seconds. Satisfied with the temperature, he filled both glasses and shut off the faucet. He was reaching to switch off the kitchen light when a knock on the back door startled him. Peter dropped both tumblers, each of them shattering on the hard floor, showering the room with glass and water. "Fuck."

"Sorry," a voice called from outside.

Peter turned the light back on and carefully picked his way across the glass-strewn floor to the door. He could see Alex outside, rubbing her arms and hopping from foot to foot. "Can I come in?" she asked. "It's getting cold out here." Peter undid the locks and opened the door, letting her inside before securing the door again. He was about to make a comment about her timing when he noticed the bloodstains on her top and pants.

"What happened to you?"

Alex looked down at herself. "God, I'd forgotten. I'm fine. Krueger got to Kat."

Peter swallowed, not sure he wanted to know the answer to his next question. "Is she...?"

"She's okay, for now. Her right arm was cut to pieces below the elbow and she nearly bled to death. She's being kept at Springwood General overnight."

"That's something, I guess." He listened while Alex recalled what had happened.

Chris appeared in the kitchen doorway. "What's all the noise in—"

"Don't come in!" Peter warned. "There's broken glass everywhere."

"So I can see. What have you been doing in here?" Chris noticed Alex. "Hey, how are you?"

"I've been better," Alex admitted.

"The blood is Kat's," Peter explained. "Krueger almost killed her." Before Alex could repeat her explanation, Heather was standing behind Chris.

"I've got the Hypno-Jesus, Alex, what happened to you?"

Peter sent Alex into the living room with Chris and Heather to retell her story again while he cleaned the mess up in the kitchen. After retrieving all the broken glass and wiping the floor dry, he joined the others in front of the TV. Alex switched off the set despite protestations from Chris.

"We have to talk about what we're going to do," she announced. "I know some of you found what I was suggesting this morning hard to believe but—"

"You were right," Chris cut in. "I didn't want to hear what you were saying then, but you were right about us having changed, altered. All three of us experienced that this afternoon." He told her about the fire at the multiplex, while Peter talked about using his newfound abilities on Johnston and Heather admitted sneaking her words into Simone's mind.

"We can't use these abilities," Alex said once the others had finished. "We have to find a way of suppressing them." She held out the bottle of Hypnocil Heather had brought downstairs. "This is a good start, but all of us have to be taking it for the drug to be effective."

"Hold on," Chris said. "Why can't we use our talents? What's wrong with using them?"

"Look at where they came from," Alex replied. "If Krueger has brought these abilities out of us, he's done it for reasons of his own. These talents, these gifts, whatever you want to call them, they're not a good thing."

"How can you say that? All my life, I've been pushed around by my dad, by Coach, by people like them. They've forced me to do what they want, to follow their rules. I don't have to do that anymore. Now you're saying I should pretend nothing's changed? You're crazy!"

"Chris, listen to yourself. This isn't about getting what you want, fulfilling your power fantasies. This about keeping all of us safe from Krueger."

"I can handle that asshole."

"Bullshit. You can't even handle your new ability. What would have happened if Heather and Peter hadn't woken you up in the multiplex? How many people would have died in that fire?"

"The sprinklers came on, the smoke alarm caught it."

Alex stood up. "You're not in control of this, Chris, don't pretend that you are. None of us are. I'm scared by what's happening to us but at least I'm not afraid to admit it."

"I'm not afraid of anything," Chris insisted. "Don't try and twist this around to make yourself look like the hero."

"I'm not." Alex shook her head in amazement. "For fuck's sake, what are you talking about? I never said anything about being a hero."

"You're trying to tell us what to do, but you're not the boss of me. Nobody is anymore. Get that straight or else."

Alex stepped closer to Chris. "Or else what? You're gonna burn me?"

Chris stood up, confronting Alex. "I'll do whatever I have to. I'm not being pushed around anymore."

"I'm not trying to push you around," Alex insisted. "Can't you see you're being corrupted by this? You all are. Heather used her ability against that girl in the changing room to make herself feel better. Peter attacked Joey Johnston; he bullied the bully."

"What's wrong with that?" Chris demanded.

"This is turning us into the people we hate, can't you see that?"

"Maybe she's right." Peter began nervously.

"Shut the fuck up." Chris snarled at him. "Nobody asked your opinion."

"Chris, don't be like this," Heather pleaded, but her words were ignored.

"I can be however the fuck I want." he snapped.

"Fine," Alex said quietly. "Nobody's gonna push you around anymore. You're in charge now, you've got the power. And what do

you do with it? Start pushing other people around. Congratulations, Chris. You've become exactly what your father always wanted you to be. You're the man now."

Chris lashed out with the back of his hand, the blow sending Alex sprawling to the floor. "I'm gonna kill you, bitch! I'm gonna—" Chris stopped abruptly, realization creeping across his face. "W-what am I doing?"

"Exactly what Krueger wants," Alex said sadly.

He looked at Heather and then ran from the room. Moments later they heard him burst out of the kitchen and sprint away from the house. "I'm going after him," Heather said. "Peter, stay here and look after Alex, okay?" She was gone before he could agree, hurrying after the distraught Chris.

Alex was still lying on the floor, one hand nursing her right cheekbone. "Fuck, that hurts!" she winced. "Remind me never to take up boxing."

"You should put some ice on that," Peter suggested.

"Later," she replied. "Right now I'm going to grab a shower. I've been wearing Kat's blood all afternoon and I don't want to fall asleep in these clothes."

***

Heather found Chris sitting on the sidewalk outside his house, head buried in his hands, sobbing. She approached him gingerly, not sure how to comfort him. "Are you okay?"

"Do I look okay?" Chris shouted, wiping tears from his face.

Heather shrugged. "You look good to me."

Chris shook his head. "God, I don't know what came over me in there. Alex kept talking and I saw red. I really wanted to kill her, you know? I wanted to see her burn. The hatred, it was like a ball of flame in my chest. I wanted to use it, use it against her." He leaned back and looked at the night sky. A few stars peered through the gray and white clouds beneath the moon. "Everything she said was true."

"I know." Heather sat beside him on the sidewalk, her feet on the side of the road. "When I was in that changing room at the mall, I

could feel the power I had over Simone. I started thinking of all the things I could do: make her cut off her own hair, hurt herself, even kill herself. It scared me, but those feelings, they excited me too. It took all my willpower not to do more to Simone, not to hurt her. God knows, she's made my life a misery often enough."

"But once you start down that road..."

"Who knows if we can turn back? Scary, isn't it?" Heather reached over and took one of Chris's hands, holding it in her own. "We have to help each other, look after each other. That's the only way we'll get through this."

Chris turned to her and smiled. "You want to know something?"

She frowned, unsure of what he was going to say. "What?"

"I always liked you."

"You did?"

He nodded, the smile broadening into a grin. "Yeah. I used to see you in the hallways at school. I wanted to talk to you but, well..."

"Well what?"

Chris looked down. "I was afraid. I didn't think you'd feel the same way."

Now it was Heather's turn to smile. "You want to know something?"

"What?"

"I liked you too. I was too scared to do anything about it. Scared of what the other girls would think, scared of what my mom would say."

"Why? I've seen you out with plenty of jocks."

"Yeah, but..."

"But what?"

"None of them were black."

"Oh." The smile faded from Chris's face.

"You know what it's like in school. Black girls go out with black guys, white girls go out with white guys."

"And never the two shall meet."

"Yeah. But why not?" Heather lifted Chris's hand up to her mouth and kissed it tenderly. "You like me, I like you. Why can't that work if we want it to?"

"What's your mom going say if she sees you kissing a black boy?"

"Probably go apeshit. She's always been a white trash racist bitch. That's her problem."

"So what's our problem?" Chris asked.

"Deciding whether we want to go for it."

"You heard what Alex was saying, Krueger is coming for us. We could be dead by tomorrow." He moved closer, shifting his body toward her.

Heather smiled. "So there's no time to waste, right?"

***

Peter caught himself tapping his fingers on the breakfast counter in the kitchen listening to the sound of running water upstairs. He couldn't stop thinking about Alex in the shower, the water running across her face and down toward her... Peter shook his head. He didn't want a repeat performance of what happened last night. The image of a woman with scissors for legs, cutting and slicing everything caught between her thighs—fuck, he was going to be in therapy for years if he couldn't get that shit out of his head soon.

Think about something else, anything else, preferably something ass-numbingly boring and utterly asexual. German language lessons. Gym class. Geography. Mount Rushmore. Capitals of the fifty states. The middle names of US presidents, in reverse chronological order. Foods that begin with the letter Q. Sesame Street. Anything but Alex, her hands rubbing shower gel across her stomach, the suds dribbling downward and mingling with her

"Hey, Peter!" Alex's voice jolted him back to reality. He went to the stairs and looked up. The bathroom door was ajar, steam creeping out from inside.

"Yeah?"

"I haven't got anything clean to wear. Could you get a top and jeans from Heather's room? I don't want to drip water everywhere."

"Okay." Peter went upstairs, pausing on the landing outside the bathroom door.

"You got any preferences?"

"Nothing pink." Alex called back.

"Got it." He tried two doors before finding Heather's bedroom, the posters on the walls making it easy to identify. Peter nervously sifted through Heather's clothes, eventually selecting a white Gap T-shirt and a well-worn pair of jeans. He rolled the clothes into a bundle and returned to the bathroom door. "Where do you want them?"

"Put them on the chair inside the door, thanks."

Peter pushed the door open and stepped inside. A cloud of steam filled the air, making it hard to see anything. "I can't find the chair," he eventually admitted.

"That's okay. Leave them by the door and I'll find them when I get out."

"Cool." Peter tried to leave but now the way out was lost in the mist. "This is gonna sound crazy, but I can't find the door either!"

"What are you talking about?" Alex shut off the shower.

"It's gone! I can't find the way out." Peter heard the shower door open behind him. Don't turn around, he told himself. Keep looking for the door. Don't turn around. Keep looking for the door.

"Well, could you at least hand me a towel?" Alex asked. "They're by your feet."

Peter retrieved a white towel from the floor and held it over his shoulder. Alex took it and began drying herself. "Thanks," Alex said. "I'm decent. You can turn around now if you want."

"Okay," Peter replied nervously. But a fresh cloud of steam misted up his glasses. Peter took them off and rubbed away the moisture. As he did, a flash of movement crossed his vision and something punched his stomach. Peter looked down and saw four metal talons embedded in him.

Krueger stepped out of the steam clouds and smiled. "Like it hot and wet, do you Peter? Try this for kicks!" He ripped his fingerknives away and blood spurted from the wounds, splashing the tiled walls and floor. Peter sank to his knees, the sound of Krueger's laughter echoing round the bathroom, mocking the teenager as his blood—

***

"Hey, no falling asleep!" Alex shouted from the stairs. Peter snapped awake, his hands still clasped over his stomach where Krueger's blades had stabbed him. Alex came into the living room where Peter was slumped on an easy chair. She was dressed in a white T-shirt and a faded pair of jeans, exactly like those Peter had chosen for her in the dream. Alex finished toweling her hair dry and then opened a bottle of Hypnocil from her pocket and threw a pill to him. "Take that. If you do fall asleep we don't want you dreaming. That will give Krueger a chance to manipulate us."

"You're right." Peter swallowed the pill, downing it with a swig of Coke. "Where'd you get the clothes?"

"Borrowed them from Heather's room," Alex replied, "Not a perfect fit but close enough. Hope she won't mind."

"Before you came downstairs, I was..." Peter began. "It doesn't matter."

Alex shrugged. "Okay." She bent over to pull on her combat boots. "Any sign of Chris or Heather yet?"

"No, they haven't..." Peter stopped speaking. Two trickles of blood were dripping from Alex's nostrils. "Are you alright?" he asked, gesturing at her face. "You're bleeding."

Alex touched a hand to her face and quickly pulled it away, shocked to see blood on her fingers. "I don't understand, I never get nose bleeds..." Her words trailed off, her eyes widening. "It's Kat! She's dying!"

"How do you know?"

"I can feel it happening!" Alex shouted, already running for the door. "Come on, we've got to get to the hospital! We've got to wake her up!"

***

Kat opened her eyes and knew she was dreaming. For a start, everything in the hospital that had been white when she fell asleep was now black: the sheets on her bed, the walls and floors, all of them were pitch black. The institutional fluorescent lights in the ceiling had been replaced with red tubes, while black and red candles

dripped wax from brackets on the walls. Either she was dreaming or somebody had given this place one hell of a Goth-horror makeover while she slept.

"So much for the Hypnocil," kat muttered. She examined the bandage on her arm, watching as blood from the wounds soaked through the dressing so the words "1 down—5 to go" were clearly visible. "I get the message!" she shouted, her voice echoing around the room. Kat pulled back the covers and stood up, the hospital gown clinging to her body. It was hot in here, boiling hot, and sweat was soaking through the starchy cotton fabric. Instead of the usual bitter antiseptic she could smell something else: fear and iron, slaughterhouse scents. She could hear a woman's voice calling for help in the distance.

"Alex, is that you?" Kat shouted back. "Are you okay?" But no reply came.

She ventured out into the corridor. Another scream cut through the air, closer this time, filled with pain and anguish. "Help me, somebody, please!" Kat ran along the hall toward the voice. The nearer she got, the darker her surroundings became. Soon there was no light except for a yellow glow ahead, spilling from a doorway. Kat slowed as she reached the door. It led to a spiral staircase of black metal descending into clouds of steam, the mist obscuring whatever was below.

"Alex? Are you still there?"

"Down here. Hurry."

Kat remembered a gesture, something she had done thousands of times as a child even though her family wasn't Catholic—the sign of the cross. She had denied any sort of faith since puberty, refusing to admit she still believed, buried that fragment of the past deep inside herself. But now, now it came flooding back. It's just fear, Kat thought. I'm afraid of dying. In any other circumstance, I'd laugh at myself for doing this, but now... She reached a hand upward, touching the fingertips to her forehead, then down to her chest, up and across to her left breast, then over to her right. "May God have mercy on my soul," she whispered, then slowly began descending the spiral staircase. Within seconds the mist had swallowed her whole.

***

Alex and Peter ran the two miles to Springwood General, gasping for breath by the time they arrived. A burly security guard at the front desk tried to refuse them entry, his hand lingering by a revolver holstered on one hip. "It's after midnight. No visitors allowed into the hospital after ten, let alone after midnight. Unless you are suffering a medical emergency of your own, I must ask you to leave." Alex shoved her way past the guard, but he caught hold of Peter's arm and refused to let the youth go. Alex hesitated, unsure of what to do.

"Go!" Peter shouted. "You've got to wake Kat. Go."

Alex nodded and ran for the stairs, leaving Peter behind. The guard punched an alarm button on the wall. "Your friend won't get far," he told Peter. "We've got somebody patrolling each floor of this place."

***

At the bottom of the spiral staircase lurked a dimly lit industrial boiler room, all clinking chains and dripping water. Kat recognized it from Alex's description: this was Krueger's domain, his home in the realm of nightmares. She had been lured here to face him, just like in her vision.

"A lamb to the slaughter," a man whispered in the dark. "Sacrificial lamb."

Kat recognized Krueger's voice. Beyond his words she could hear something else, the familiar sound of metal being scraped back and forth across metal. Where did she hear that sound before? Sundays after church, of course. The whole family gathered around the table while her father proudly sharpened the carving knife. A lamb cried out in the distance, frightened and alone. Metal flashed in the dark and the lamb's cries were cut short. Something splashed nearby, wet and warm. Kat looked down to see a pool of blood spreading across the floor to her bare feet. Don't show you're scared, she told herself. Don't give this fucker the satisfaction.

"Come out and face me, Krueger." she shouted. "Let's get this over with."

"There's no rush, Katherine." Her dad emerged from the shadows, the bloody carving knife held in his hands. "We've got all night to get to know each other better. You and I are going to be such good friends, such special friends."

"Fuck you! You're not my father."

"How can you say that?" Her dad moved closer, one hand grabbing Kat by the chin. He tilted her face toward him, staring deep into her eyes. "You know I've always had special feelings for you, Katherine."

"Stop calling me Katherine. My name is Kat."

"But you're my special little girl, Katherine. Don't you want to have fun?"

"You're not my dad. This isn't real, it's only a nightmare." Kat closed her eyes, shutting out the image tormenting her. "It's just another nightmare."

"Open your eyes, bitch." Krueger snarled. Kat could feel his fingerknives pressing against her chest, hear the blades slicing through the flimsy material of her hospital gown. She could feel his hot breath on her face, smell the putrid, rotting stench of his presence. "Look at me. I said look at me, bitch."

Kat opened her eyes. Krueger had stripped away the gown, leaving her naked, but she refused to cover herself. "I'm not ashamed of my body," she said. "You can't frighten me that way!"

He laughed at her, rejoicing in Kat's defiance. "All those tattoos, all those holes you've had put in your body, all that pain. Would you like some more?"

"This isn't real, this is only a nightmare," she maintained.

"Tell yourself that all you like, it won't save you from me." Krueger gestured at her body. "Let the pain begin."

Kat could sense something moving on her back, something sliding across her skin. She peered over a shoulder and gasped. The two snake tattoos were coming to life as they had done in her vision. The heads burst from her skin, their eyes blinking, forked tongues flicking outward as the reptiles hissed at her. Then the rest of their

bodies detached themselves, sliding across her skin, curving around her torso.

"My, my, what pretty pictures you have on you," Krueger taunted. "Let's see what else they can do." He gestured again and Kat screamed in pain.

A circle of barbed wire appeared around each of her wrists, replacing the tattoos that had been there. She watched aghast as the circles began to tighten, metal barbs digging into her flesh, cutting and gouging, burying themselves further and further into each wrist, scraping against bones.

"What else?" Krueger asked rhetorically. "What about the rest of them?"

Kat screamed again as her other tattoos came to life, each image bursting from the skin, exposing the flesh beneath, blood seeping from every wound, draining down her legs and pooling at her feet. The snakes were passing her breasts now, riding the skin upward to coil round her neck. She tried to pull them away but the barbed wire circles slicing into her wrists had closed to only an inch in diameter, crippling her hands.

Krueger snapped his fingers and the barbed wire bracelets contracted still further, cutting through bone and sinew and tendon, until there was nothing left to cut. Two useless lumps of flesh and bone fell to the boiler room floor, splashing in the crimson puddle around Kat's legs. She howled in agony as blood spurted from the stumps where her wrists had been.

"Look, Mom, no hands!" Krueger announced, laughing at his own joke. "Since you enjoy getting your body pierced, let's add a few extra holes."

***

Alex raced up the stairs to the floor where Kat was being kept overnight. As Alex reached the doorway a hand grabbed her from behind. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" a thickset female security guard demanded.

"My friend's in there," Alex gasped, pointing through the door. "She needs help! Come on, we've only got a few seconds to save her!"

"Nonsense," the guard replied tersely. She tapped the metal nametag on her uniform: MANDY BANKS. "I'm in charge here, not you. I'm quite sure the doctors and nurses have got everyone under control, they don't need your—" Alex slammed her boot down on the guard's foot, forcing a howl of pain from the hefty woman. But the guard kept hold of Alex, refusing to let her go. "You'll pay for that, you little shit."

"Let me go!" Alex screamed at her captor. "Kat's dying while you're keeping me here, you stupid bitch!"

A scream ripped through the ward, a cry filled with agony and sorrow. "What the hell?" The guard relaxed her grip and Alex was gone, running inside, Banks hurried after her, calling for backup on her radio. "This is Mandy on three. I need every available body up here. Got some little maniac trying to break into one of the wards. Am in pursuit."

"No!"

Banks pulled aside the curtain around one of the beds. She staggered backward, shocked by the scene in front of her. Alex had collapsed and was sobbing on the floor, hands covering her face. On the bed was the naked body of a teenage girl. No, not the body, Banks thought, correcting herself, but the naked corpse of a teenage girl.

The hands were missing, having apparently been sheared off at the wrists, yet there was no blood visible on the bed. Almost every square inch of skin on the torso, arms and legs of the corpse was obscured by metal piercing studs; hundreds, even thousands of them. Angry red bruises were visible around the neck, suggesting the victim had been strangled. But most disturbing of all was the message seemingly painted in blood on the wall behind the bed: 2 DOWN—4 TO GO. The security guard turned away and vomited, retching until she had nothing left to expel, and then vomited some more.

TWELVE

Alex spent the rest of Saturday night explaining herself at Springwood Police Station. How had she known Kat was in danger? I felt it, sensed it, she told them. Who did this to Kat? You wouldn't believe me. What did the message on the wall mean? Silence. The same questions, over and over and over. The cops brought in her mom, hoping Joyce might be able to get some answers from the girl, but with no more success. Finally, Sheriff Williams took Alex aside in one of the interview rooms. His face was care-worn and friendly, his words soothing.

"Look, Alex, I know what's going on. I recognize the signs. A group of teenagers, each of them outsiders in their own way, square pegs, if you like. The six of you cut school and get into trouble. One of you gets hurt and the rest clam up, refusing to say what really happened. Now you're being picked off, one by one. This isn't the first time this has happened in my town."

"I know."

"It can be stopped, it can be prevented."

Alex shook her head. "It's too late for us."

"It's never too late. We can help you, if you'll let us."

"I tried to tell one of your officers before, but he wouldn't listen."

Williams rested a hand on her shoulder. "I'm listening now."

"Don't touch me!"

The sheriff withdrew his hand hurriedly. He began pacing the interview room. "I can't pretend I understand why this is happening. Being a teenager, it's a difficult time. I used to be one myself, a long time ago, if you can believe that. You get mixed up, think you see things that aren't true, think you know more than you do. You don't want to trust anyone. But these things, they get out of hand. We've all seen what happens: high school students killing each other, suicide pacts and guns and..." He stopped pacing. "I don't want to see that happen to you, Alex. I don't want to see that happen here in Springwood."

"Am I under arrest?"

"No, of course not. The guard at the hospital said it was impossible for you to have harmed the Harris girl like that in the few seconds you were out of sight. Security cameras confirm your movements through the hospital. Sadly they didn't have them in her ward. We don't know who or what killed that girl, but it wasn't you."

"Then can I go?" Alex asked impatiently.

"If you want to," Williams said.

Alex was already heading for the exit. The sheriff called her to a halt. "Look, Alex, if you need someone to talk to..."

"Spare me the 'I care about you' routine, okay? You don't know me and you certainly don't give a shit about me or any of my friends. If you did, you'd have warned us about him, instead of covering it up." Alex took a step toward the sheriff. "Did you honestly think if nobody ever mentioned his name again, he'd simply disappear? Did you really believe something that evil doesn't endure, doesn't keep searching for another way to escape?"

"Him... You mean..."

Alex laughed bitterly. "You can't even bring yourself to say his name out loud, can you? You fucking coward. Kat is dead. Lloyd is in a coma. How many more of my friends are going to die before this is over? How many more victims because you didn't do your job, because you didn't warn us? And you wonder why I don't cooperate? Fuck you." She stormed from the room, pushing past her mom in the corridor and running from the building, running as fast as she could.

***

Peter spent much of Sunday trying to find out what had happened inside the hospital the previous night. The security guard had kept him by the front doors, and he was left frustrated at not knowing what was going on. When the police cars arrived, Peter knew Kat must be dead. The look on the faces of the cops attending the scene underlined that, their glassy eyes and colorless skin a mute testimony to the horrors found upstairs. Peter was briefly questioned at the hospital and released, dismissed as a minor player in events. He hung around outside long enough to see Alex bundled into a

police car and taken away. Soon afterwards, a black body bag was wheeled past. "Never seen anything like that in my life," the man pushing the gurney muttered. "What could do that?"

Krueger had killed Kat, Peter knew that much for certain. But few details were released beyond official confirmation that a female patient at Springwood General had died during the night in suspicious circumstances. Her name would not be released until the family had been informed. Meanwhile, a police investigation into the incident was being launched. Peter arrived home after dawn to find his father slumped unconscious in front of the television, a sports channel still blaring from the screen. The old bastard doesn't even realize I never got home, Peter thought. He couldn't care less if I'm dead or alive. Peter went up to his room, took another Hypnocil and collapsed into a dreamless sleep.

It was Alex's mom who woke him on Sunday morning, arguing with Peter's father. Their raised voices brought Peter back downstairs, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "What's going on?" An upset, middle-aged woman was standing at the front door, refusing to leave. She saw Peter and pushed past his father.

"Do you know my daughter, Alexandra?"

"Alex?"

"Yes, that's her. Do you know where she is?"

"Sorry, I don't. I haven't seen her since last night at the hospital."

"Hospital?" Peter's father scowled. "What's this about a hospital?"

Alex's mom shook her head. "I saw her after that, at the police station. She was very upset about what happened to that poor girl. I thought you might know where Alex is now. She ran away from me last night and I haven't seen her since. The police say they can't list her as missing until she's been gone twenty-four hours, but that could be too late."

Peter grabbed his jacket from a hook by the front door. I'll look for her." But his father grabbed Peter by the arm, refusing to let him leave.

"You're not going anywhere, not without my permission."

"But Dad—"

"Forget it. I don't know what's been going on round here," as usual, Peter thought, "but I'm not letting you out of my sight. You have chores to do."

"I don't believe you," Alex's mom spluttered. "My daughter is missing, your son has offered to help find her, and you're more concerned about his chores. What kind of a father are you?"

"Lady, don't tell me how to look after my son."

"Well, somebody should. Plainly you haven't got a clue what these children have been up to. Did you know one of them died early this morning?" Peter's father began to speak but nothing came out of his mouth, surprise overtaking him. "Did you know Peter and his friends have been suspended from school after what happened on Friday?" Alex's mom stepped closer, jabbing a finger into his chest. "Do you know anything at all about your son?"

Peter's arm was released as his father rounded on Mrs Corwin. "Now listen to me, lady. I don't care what you think you know or don't know. I don't have to stand here in my own home while you accuse me of being a bad parent. Get your stuck-up ass out of my house, and leave me and my son alone. Maybe if you were a better parent yourself, you'd have a better idea where your daughter is right now. Did you think about that?"

Peter didn't need another opportunity. He bolted out the door, running along Elm Street, ignoring the curses and threats shouted after him by his father. I'll worry about the old man later, he decided. Right now I have to find Alex. She's the only one making any sense in all of this mess. He went to Heather's house first. Chris and Heather were both there, unaware of what was going on. "You and Alex were gone when we came back here," Chris said, holding hands with Heather at the front door. "I owe Alex an apology."

It didn't take a genius to figure out what Heather and Chris had been doing since last night. "So you haven't heard what happened to Kat."

"No," Heather admitted. "I was planning to visit her in hospital later."

"Don't bother," Peter snapped. "She's dead."

"Dead?" Chris shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Krueger got her. Alex and I tried to stop him but we were too late. We might have made it in time if you guys had been here."

Heather was trying to absorb the news about Kat. "Are you sure?"

"I hope whatever you were doing last night was worth it," Peter snarled. "There's only four of us left now. Why don't you think about that while I'm looking for Alex?" He stalked off, knowing it wasn't Chris or Heather's fault that Kat was dead. But he needed somebody to blame besides Krueger, somebody human to vent his frustrations upon. He'd apologize to Chris and Heather later once he'd calmed down. In the meantime he still had to find Alex.

***

Joey was spoiling for a fight. He'd been humiliated at the mall yesterday, attacked by some sneaky bastard too chicken to show his face. What kind of gutless turd hits you in the face with a tennis racket and then hides? A real man would stand and fight. That's what Joseph Johnston Senior had taught him, the times he bothered to come home between month-long trips driving his rig across America. That's what Joey had told the other kids when he was growing up, that his pop was a truck driver. It sounded better than admitting his father was back in jail for armed robbery and manslaughter. Yeah, his old man had always been a stand-up guy, never afraid to face anyone, even in prison. That was why he'd bled to death in the showers one day, after getting into a brawl and having a six-inch shank shoved through his throat.

Joey was driving around Springwood in the one thing his pop had left him, a 1980 Cadillac. It was a bucket of rust and drank oil like a hobo drinks gut rot, but the car was still Joey's pride and joy. He almost always felt like a real man when he was behind the wheel. But even cruising the streets of Springwood and laughing at the faithful as they came out of church wasn't shifting the chip off his shoulder today. He wanted some payback. It took the sight of that geek O'Mahoney crossing the road to put a smile back on Joey's face. He gunned the engine into life and followed the nerd along Elm Street. O'Mahoney tried to run but it did him no good. Joey tailed him to the

back gates of Springwood High, nodding as his quarry jumped the fence and sprinted into the school grounds. Perfect. They wouldn't be disturbed there. Joey couldn't have chosen a better place himself. He left the car out on the road and vaulted the fence, hurrying after the little shit.

O'Mahoney scurried from door to door, trying to find a way inside without success. Joey eventually trapped him in a narrow covered walkway between two blocks, the area thick with the stench of rotting food seeping from the school cafeteria's dumpsters nearby "Please, I don't want any trouble," the wimp began, his face filled with fear.

Joey snorted. "Then you shouldn't have hit me when my guard was down on Friday, should you? My nuts are black and blue, thanks to you."

"You broke my glasses," O'Mahoney protested.

"Poor baby. You've got another pair on so what's the problem?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me?" Joey laughed at that long and hard. "You got me with a sucker punch under the bleachers. This time I'm ready for you, four eyes." He advanced on O'Mahoney whose face began frowning. "What the fuck are you doing? Shitting your pants already?"

"Not... exactly..." O'Mahoney gasped. His hands reached past Joey, beckoning something toward them. Joey glanced over his shoulder in time to see the dumpster rolling toward him, as if someone was pushing it. He jumped out of the way, rolling across the ground to avoid being crushed by the heavy metal box.

"Who did that?" Joey demanded, looking around to see who was helping the nerd.

"I did," O'Mahoney replied, a smile on his lips. "It works, it actually works."

"What works? What the hell are you talking about?"

"This."

Joey felt himself being lifted into the air, as if an invisible hand had picked him up. "What the fuck?" He turned his face to look at O'Mahoney. The pale-faced geek was gesturing at him, guiding his movements through the air. "This is some kind of trick."

"No tricks, merely mind over matter."

"When I get down from here..." Joey began, but his mouth suddenly closed as O'Mahoney clenched a fist.

"Shut your trap, Johnston," the geek snapped. "I've got the mind and you don't matter anymore. You'll never hassle me or any other kid again after today, you understand?"

Joey couldn't open his mouth so he shook his head angrily.

O'Mahoney closed his fist tighter and Joey felt his throat constricting, his nostrils being pinched shut by an unseen force. He tried to force his mouth open but it did no good. He couldn't breath in or out. Already he could feel his heart hammering inside his chest, the veins in the side of his forehead throbbing in protest.

"You come near me or any other kid again and I'll make you piss your pants in front of every girl at school, you got that?"

Joey was too busy fighting for breath to acknowledge what O'Mahoney was saying.

"I see you need another demonstration." O'Mahoney blinked and Joey felt his bladder lose control, a stream of urine soaking the front of his faded jeans, running down his legs. O'Mahoney took another step closer. "Now, do we have an understanding?"

Joey nodded helplessly.

"That's better. You should be grateful I don't hurt you the same way you've hurt me over the years, but threats are so much more effective than actual pain, don't you agree?"

Joey nodded again.

O'Mahoney smiled broadly. His hands fell to his sides and Joey collapsed to the ground, his mouth and nostrils open again and gasping for breath. He watched O'Mahoney walking away and did nothing to stop him. Joey didn't feel like fighting anymore.

***

It was another three hours before Peter found Alex sitting on the bench in the Zen garden at the hospital. She saw him approaching and smiled. "How'd you find me?"

"I looked everywhere else, then I remembered this place." He sat beside her on the bench. "You were talking with Kat here yesterday

so I figured you might come back."

Alex nodded. She told him what Krueger had done to Kat, the message on the wall. "There's something I don't understand," she said. "I gave her enough Hypnocil to make sure she didn't dream last night. It should have been impossible for Krueger to hurt her."

Peter let his eyes wander across the patterns in the white pebbles. "Maybe it works the same way as our new abilities. As long as one of us is dreaming, all of us are vulnerable." He thought back to the previous night. "Last night, when you were having a shower, I dozed off at Heather's place. God, you don't think...?"

"No," Alex replied quickly. "What happened to Kat was long after I'd woken you up. Maybe it was Chris or Heather... I don't know."

Peter nodded, a little happier. "Maybe the sedatives the hospital gave Kat diminished the effectiveness of the Hypnocil?"

"Maybe." Alex sighed. "Too many questions, not enough answers." She glanced at the hospital through a gap in the trees. "Krueger's got something planned for each of us. I guess Kat wasn't part of his plans."

"Your mom's looking for you," Peter said. "She had a huge fight with my dad. She can dish it out."

"Runs in the family," Alex said sheepishly.

"I know. Speaking of Chris, he wants to apologize to you. You were right, he was wrong."

"Like I didn't already know that."

"Him and Heather, I think they're... You know."

Alex grinned. "They're... You know?' I never knew boys could be so coy."

"They're sleeping together, alright? Happy now?" Peter could feel himself blushing. "We don't talk about things like that in my family."

"Do you talk with your dad about anything?"

"Are you kidding? Grunting passes for conversation with him. I did run into..." Peter's voice trailed off, a shadow passing over his face.

"You ran into who?"

"Doesn't matter."

Alex got up and stretched. "Well, guess I better go face the music."

"You want me to walk you home?"

"Next you'll be offering to carry my books to class," she teased.

"Whatever," Peter complained sulkily. "I was just asking."

"Yes, I would like you to walk me home," Alex said.

"Okay." Peter stood up and followed her out of the garden. "I could hold your hand, if you wanted."

"One step at a time, Romeo."

***

Joyce was standing by the front door, chewing her fingernails, when Peter and Alex emerged from the gathering dusk. The two teenagers were strolling along Elm Street, a small space between them. Joyce called to them as they approached the house. "You found her. Thank goodness. Peter, thank you for bringing her home to me."

"Don't worry about it," he said before turning to Alex. "Well, I better go face my old man. Dad's probably ready to kill me by now."

"If your father gives you any trouble, come back here," Joyce offered.

"Thanks, but it'll be okay." Peter smiled. "I used to be so scared of people like my dad, but there's worse things in the world than him."

"Before you go, Peter, I have to tell you something," Joyce said. "Principal Shaye called round earlier. You, Alex and two other students are being suspended for cutting classes. You have to go into school at noon tomorrow to get formal notification."

Peter smiled at Alex. "Guess I'll see you outside the principal's office."

"High noon," she replied before going inside. "See you then." Joyce waved goodbye to Peter as he left then closed the front door. Her daughter was already making for the stairs. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Bed. I'm exhausted. I haven't slept for what feels like days."

"Then another few minutes shouldn't make any difference. We have to talk, young lady." Joyce caught Alex by the arm and led her into the kitchen. She sat the teenager down at the table and took the seat opposite. "Where have you been all day? I've been worried sick about you."

"Look, Mom, I'm sorry. I know the last couple days haven't been great..."

"Alex, I don't even know who you are any more," Joyce said, trying to hold on to her emotions. "When you pushed past me at the police station last night, you were like a different person. What's happening to you?"

"I'm... changing. Growing up. Facing my responsibilities."

"Don't lie to me, Alex. You're running away from something. Tell me who or what it is, maybe I can help." She reached forward, taking her daughter's hands between her own. "Whatever is scaring you, we can face it together. You must know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

"Yes, but..."

"But what? Tell me.".

"You wouldn't understand, and you certainly wouldn't believe me."

"Try."

Alex sighed. "There's a monster in our nightmares. He wants to kill us, to hurt us. But he also wants to use us, I think. He says we're his playthings. He killed Kat. He put Lloyd in a coma. Now he's coming for the rest of us."

"You, Peter and these other two students, Heather and Christopher?"

"Chris, yes."

"What kind of monster?" Joyce tried to keep the doubt from her eyes but she'd never been able to hide anything from Alex. They were too much alike.

"You don't believe me," Alex said flatly. "I knew you wouldn't."

"It's not that I don't believe you, honey," Joyce pleaded. "I'm simply trying to understand what you're telling me."

"Forget it. We're both wasting our time," Alex snapped, standing up. "I'm going to bed, okay?"

"Alex, wait." Joyce refused to let her daughter leave yet. "I've made you an appointment for tomorrow, with a doctor. He says he can help."

"What kind of doctor?"

"His name is Taubmann and—"

"What kind of doctor?" Alex demanded.

"A psychiatrist," Joyce admitted. "He thinks you and the others might be suffering from some sort of group hysteria, sharing a collective delusion where you witness things that aren't real but think they are."

"You don't get it, do you?" Alex snarled. "This creature that's hunting us, stalking us, he's real, as real as you or me or Doctor fucking Taubmann!"

"He suggests a course of therapy and treatment, perhaps residential."

"Where?"

"At a facility on the outskirts of town. It's called Westin Hills."

"No fucking way."

"Please, Alex, this is for your own—"

"I am not losing my mind, Mom. I know what I saw and I know what's happening to me. So you and Dr Taubmann can make all the little plans and schemes you want, but I won't end up in a rubber room with a straitjacket for company. It's not going to happen."

Alex stormed from the room, ran up the stairs and into her bedroom, slamming the door shut. "Oh Alex," Joyce whispered. "What have I done?"

THIRTEEN

Principal Shaye stared at the mirror on the back of his office door. I swear I'll have more gray hair before this is over. He'd had little sleep on Sunday night, his mind too busy rehearsing what he should say to the four students. Come on too strong and they would reject him as a draconian disciplinarian. Try too hard to be their friend and they would laugh in his face. In any high school the principal is supposed to be in charge, but it was the students who made it heaven or a hellhole. Springwood was a little of both.

The intercom on his desk beeped for attention. Shaye pushed the response button. "Alright, Grace, send them in."

"Yes, Principal Shaye."

He walked around his desk and sank into his high-backed swivel chair, composing his hands on the blotter in front of him. The door opened and his secretary ushered in four students, directing them to the chairs arranged before Shaye's desk. "Thank you, Grace. We're not to be disturbed."

"Yes, sir." She closed the door after giving him a smile of encouragement. Grace had left the files for all four students on his desk. Shaye had read each thoroughly, before placing them neatly on top of his desk once again.

"I must say I'm surprised to see you all here in such circumstances the principal began. "Chris, you were an exemplary student until a week ago: good grades, captain of the basketball team and a pillar of pride for the school. In the space of a few days you've jeopardized your education and your chances of a sports scholarship. And for what? Getting into a fight, then cutting classes for this ill-advised trip to the Katja Institute." Shaye studied the face of the tall teenager opposite expecting to see shame or embarrassment. But Chris appeared more interested in holding hands with the girl beside him. The principal turned to her next, hoping for more of a response.

"Heather Sutherland. Not such a stellar performer in class but still an important contributor to school spirit. I could have forgiven the damage to my car but this latest infringement?" Shaye studied her

but she seemed unashamed, unabashed by his firm words. The principal moved on to the next student. "And Peter, one of our most promising academic pupils. I know you've suffered at the hands of bullies like Joey Johnston but, as I've told you before, such elements fall away the further you progress in life. Get through these difficult years and the future is yours." To Shaye's eyes the O'Mahoney boy appeared ill at ease, uncomfortable. That was something, but still not the reaction he'd been expecting.

"Last but not least, Alexandra Corwin. You were a new arrival at Springwood this semester, and this is the first time we've met. I wish the circumstances were more fitting, but they are of your own making." Shaye leaned back in his chair, regarding all four of them. "Frankly, your behavior has left me with quite a dilemma. Cutting classes is bad enough, but it's what you did instead of coming to school that worries me more. Taking part in a clinical drug trial while underage? Look at the consequences of that: Lloyd Reeves is in a coma at Springwood General, a coma from which the doctors doubt he'll ever recover. In the three days since that incident, Katherine Walker has died in the same hospital after apparently trying to kill herself."

Alex sighed loudly.

"Do you have something to say, Miss Corwin?"

"We know you're going to suspend us. Cut to the chase, okay?"

Shaye shook his head sadly. "I don't know where this attitude is coming from. I don't pretend to know what is happening with the four of you, or what happened to Lloyd or Katherine. But I do know this: events are accelerating out of your control. Whatever pact you four have formed, whatever you believe is going on, please, think again. Do you honestly want your parents and siblings to be attending your funerals, as Katherine's family will be doing tomorrow?"

"Her funeral is tomorrow?" Peter asked. "Why so soon?

"I talked with the Walkers earlier today. They have requested none of the students from Katherine's classes attend the service. It's to be a small, family gathering at midday. No outsiders are welcome. They believe it is for the best."

"But we're Kat's friends," Alex insisted. "Don't we have a right to be there too, to say goodbye to her?"

The principal grimaced. "I'm sorry, but it was the family's final decision. I tried to dissuade them but they were resolute. Nobody beyond her family will be allowed inside the chapel or at the graveside during the burial." Shaye looked at the four envelopes on his desk. "As for your punishment, Miss Corwin is right. I am suspending all of you for a week while recent events are being investigated. There is a letter in these envelopes for each of your parents that will explain my reasons and recommendations to them."

"What recommendations?" Chris asked.

"I am suggesting you be kept apart while on suspension. There seems to be an unhealthy bond developing between the four of you and I wish to see that bond broken, or at least put aside for now."

"Forget it," Chris warned. "Heather and I won't be separated. You don't have any jurisdiction outside the school gate."

"No, but your parents are still your legal guardians. That's why I am sending the letters directly to them."

Heather stood up. "Are we done?"

"I haven't finished talking yet," the principal replied.

"Whatever," Heather said and walked to the door. "You've already suspended us so we don't have to listen any more. You want to lecture us, it will have to wait till next week."

Chris followed her out, Peter and Alex also leaving. Shaye shouted after them impotently. "Come back here. I haven't finished yet." But none of them listened, none paid any attention to his words.

***

Alex called to the others once they were outside the school. "Look, I don't know about you guys, but I want to say goodbye to Kat. I owe her that much. What about you?"

"You heard Shaye, her family doesn't want anybody at the service," Chris said.

"We don't have to go to the church," Peter suggested. "We could wait until after the burial and meet by her grave."

Heather shuddered "I hate funerals. Creepy."

"But you'll be there, right?" Alex asked.

"I guess." Heather looked to Chris. "Okay?"

He nodded. "Let's go. Once my folks get that letter from Shaye, I'll be lucky if they let me out of the house." Chris and Heather strolled away holding hands, Heather resting her head on Chris's shoulder.

"What are you doing now?" Peter asked Alex.

She shrugged. "I was going to visit Lloyd, see if he's better. But I'm not sure I can face the hospital again, not after what happened to Kat." She looked at Peter. "You want to come back to my place? Mom's at work and I don't feel like being alone in that house, not knowing what happened there."

"Okay."

The two of them strolled along the sidewalk, dawdling. Alex buried her hands in the pockets of her jeans. "Kat knew how she was going to die. She saw it in a vision and her vision came true. She saw something else, too. Something about us."

"What?"

"Lloyd being murdered. He gets stabbed in the chest with a pair of scissors. She was right about her own death, I guess she must be right about that too." Alex glanced at Peter. "One of us kills him."

"One of us?"

"The four of us. Kat couldn't see who it was in her vision, but one of us murders Lloyd at night in the hospital. That's another reason I don't wanna go back there. I figure if I stay away then I can't be his killer."

"Jesus," Peter murmured. "Why would one of us want to murder Lloyd?"

"I don't know," Alex admitted. "Look, let's talk about something else."

"Okay. Like what?"

"Like what happened with your dad when you got home last night."

Peter smiled. "He was freaking out. First your mom has a go at him, then Shaye turns up asking questions. I thought the old man

was going to bust a blood vessel when I came through the door. I'd never seen him so angry."

"Did he hit you?"

"Yeah. Took his belt off, said he was going to beat some sense into me. That used to scare me, but not anymore. I told him to fuck off. You should have seen his face. That's when he lost it."

Alex studied Peter's face and arms. "I can't see any new bruises. Where did he hit you?"

"Across the chest, got me a good one too. Before he could hit me again I kicked him in the nuts. The bastard went down like a sack of potatoes. He started crying, I couldn't believe it. All my life, he's been like this tornado in the house, destroying everything in his path. As soon as I hit him back, he collapsed. It was all bluster, all bullshit."

"What did you do?"

"Told him he was never hitting me again. If he tried to lay a hand on me, I'd go straight to the police."

"Peter, you didn't use... You know..."

"The telekinesis? No. I wanted to and I was going to but he gave up before I could. I was almost disappointed, you know? Finally I had the power to fight back and I didn't need it." Peter smiled. "Plus, I remembered what you said. Every time we use what Krueger gave us, we become more like him."

"Did I say that?" Alex frowned.

"Well, something like that." Peter looked around, surprised. The two of them were standing outside Alex's house. "Hey, we're here already?"

"Yeah." Alex started toward her front door. "Coming in?"

"Sure." Peter followed her inside, closing the door behind them.

***

Alex kicked off her combat boots and went into the kitchen. "You want something to drink?" she asked, trying to keep the nervousness from her voice. She'd been hoping Peter would offer to walk her home, knowing her mom would be out all afternoon. It was true, she didn't want to be alone in the house. But there was more to her

invitation than that. She wanted to be with Peter. I don't know how far this is going to go, Alex told herself. I don't know how far I'm willing to go, or if Peter is interested for that matter. But I can't deny how I feel about him.

"Juice, if you've got any. Preferably the one with pulp in it," he replied from the hallway. "Nice place if you ignore the whole homicidal maniac attacking residents through their kids thing."

"Yeah," Alex said with a smile. She pulled an unopened carton of orange juice from the fridge and retrieved two glasses from the dishwasher, but getting the lid off the carton proved beyond her. Fuck. Why do they make these things so difficult? "Peter, since you're feeling all empowered, could you come in here and open this for me?"

"Sure." He appeared from the hallway, hands shoved in the back pockets of his jeans. "Ahh, one of those. I swear they crazy glue them shut." He took the carton and began tearing at the lid, his face contorting with effort, glasses sliding down his nose. Alex couldn't help laughing. "What's so funny?"

"Sorry," she said, suppressing another giggle. "It's your face. You look like one of those body builders straining to strike a pose."

"Thanks a lot!" Peter protested. He offered the carton back to her. "You're welcome to try if you think you can do any better."

"No, no, you're doing fine," Alex said, smiling broadly. "Go for it."

"Okay." Peter clenched his fingers around the carton again and wrenched. The top suddenly gave way and orange liquid spat out, showering Alex in juice and pulp. "Oh god! Shit, I'm so sorry. Here, let me clean that up." Peter grabbed a handful of paper towels from a roller and began wiping the front of Alex's white T-shirt before realizing his hands were brushing across her breasts. "Oh shit! Sorry. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... Sorry."

"It's okay," Alex said before bursting out laughing. "I'm fine!"

Peter blushed crimson. "I didn't mean to, um, you know..." He pointed at her chest and then hastily retracted the gesture. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Alex repeated. "The T-shirt needed washing anyway." She eled it off over her head, revealing a white bra underneath. Alex could feel Peter trying not to stare at her. She decided to play it

casual, as if she was in the habit of taking her top off in front of boys every day of the week. "I'm going to put this in to soak," she said, keeping a quiver of nerves from her voice. "I'll leave you to dry the floor, okay?" Peter nodded, his blush back in full effect as Alex went into the adjoining laundry room. "What did you want for lunch?" she called out while dousing the juice-stained T-shirt in hot water.

"I'm not really hungry," Peter replied.

"Okay."

You're not making this any easier, Alex thought. "How about I give you a guided tour of the place? Welcome to the house of horrors, see where the maniac tormented his last victim kind of thing."

"Sure."

Alex looked around the laundry room. There were plenty of clean, dry tops in here she could put on in place of the T-shirt but she decided to go without. What the hell, maybe Peter will take the hint. She walked back into the kitchen and smiled at him. "Well, you've already seen the kitchen and the hall. Why don't we go upstairs?"

"Okay."

"Okay then." Alex inclined her head toward the staircase. "After you."

Peter looked at his drink. "Should I leave this here?"

She took it out of his hands. "Probably for the best. You've already left your mark on this room. I think that's enough for one visit, don't you?" Alex led Peter into the hall, making sure her right breast brushed his arm, the material of her bra issuing a momentary caress across his skin. She went up the stairs, Peter following behind. On the landing Alex pointed at the various doors. "Bathroom, guest room, Mom's bedroom, study." She pushed open the final door and stood to one side. "And this is my room."

"So I can see." Peter peered in from the landing. "A lot tidier than mine."

"Really?" Alex raised her eyebrows, trying to look innocent. She'd spent the morning tidying up after trashing the place yesterday, trying to make her bedroom more inviting. It was all an illusion, of course. Open the closet door and you'd be overwhelmed by an avalanche of dirty clothes, books, CDs and other garbage spilling out.

For now the floor was clear, the bed was made and everything looked tidy. Alex's mom had been pleased to see her making an effort. I doubt she'd be so happy if she knew why I'd cleaned the place up, Alex thought to herself ruefully. "It's usually a hell of a lot messier than this."

"Uh huh."

Alex walked into her bedroom, hoping Peter would follow her in. "We haven't been here so long so I haven't put any posters or anything up yet."

"Yeah."

Frustration got the better of Alex. She reached out into the hall, grabbed Peter by the front of his checked shirt and dragged him into the bedroom. Once he was inside she slammed the door shut and pressed him against it, her lips finding his, her hands in his hair, her breasts pushing into his chest. Alex kissed him for long moments but he didn't respond. Finally she broke off the kiss and looked at him. "What's the matter? Don't you like me?"

"N-no, it's not that..." he stammered.

"Then what?" Alex took a half step backward. "You're not gay, right?"

"N-no, not at all. I think about girls all the time. I mean women. I mean, not all women. Just some women. Well, you, lately. A lot. Really."

"So what's the problem?"

Peter frowned. "I've been dreaming about you. About you and me. Together, if you know what I mean..."

"I've got a rough idea," Alex replied dryly.

"But those dreams, they keep turning into nightmares. You know, with him in them."

"Krueger?"

Peter nodded. "I wasn't sure if this was another one of those nightmares, whether it was real, whether you were real."

Alex smiled. "This is real, alright." She reached into a pocket of her jeans for the Hypnocil, removing two pills before throwing the bottle aside. She pushed one into Peter's mouth and then swallowed the

other. "There. Now we're both safe. No dreams, no nightmares. Just you and me. Better?"

Peter swallowed. "Y-yes," he replied nervously.

"Scared?"

"A-a little."

"Your first time?"

He nodded.

"Me too," Alex admitted. She stepped forward again so her hips rested against his, her lips moving toward him. "Relax and you might enjoy it."

Then they were kissing, Peter responding to Alex this time, his lips pressing against hers, their mouths opening, tongues touching. Alex reached behind his head, pulling him closer, pressing herself into him. Peter's arms encircled her, hands caressing her back, fingers sliding the bra straps down over her shoulders. Alex reached back and undid the clasp and then leaned back so the bra could fall away from her. Peter tilted his head down to kiss her shoulders, the hollow beneath her neck and down to her breasts. His lips parted and Alex gasped as a warm tongue licked her nipple, breath from his mouth heightening the sensations coursing through her.

She reached for the buttons on his shirt, undoing the first one carefully, then tugging at the rest, tearing them apart, roughly pulling the fabric aside. Her hands pushed his shirt off while she walked backward to the bed, Peter keeping pace with her. Alex sat on the edge of the bed and then lay back on the mattress. She watched as Peter kicked off his shoes and socks before scrambling to join her on the bed. "Are you sure about this?" he asked, a tremor in his voice.

Alex nodded happily, then pulled him closer for another kiss. Her spare hand slid down his back and inside the waistband of his jeans, grabbing hold of his butt, a smile spreading across Peter's face. He straightened up to look at her. "God, you're beautiful."

"Yeah, yeah," she replied, removing his glasses and tossing them aside. "Less talking, more action, okay?"

"Your wish is my command." Peter resumed kissing her nipples, first the right one, then across to the left, one of his hands cupping each breast in turn. His tongue licked and teased the skin around the

nipple, playing with it. Alex pushed her head back into the mattress, gasping a little as her body trembled with pleasure. She bit her bottom lip to stop herself betraying how good it felt, having him touch her like this, kiss her, control her.

Peter's hand strayed down her stomach, then across the top of her jeans, sliding between her legs, fingers pushing, feeling, wanting. Alex reached down and undid the top two buttons of her jeans, loosening them enough to allow him access. When he didn't take the hint, she grabbed his hand and pushed it inside her jeans until his fingertips touched her panties. Peter looked at her for reassurance and Alex nodded, encouraging him to keep going. His fingers moved down the silky material, stroking the fabric, caressing, probing. They withdrew to the elastic waistband of her panties and then ventured underneath, touching the skin, finding warmth and exploring it, delving deeper, pushing, searching, sliding up and downward.

A shudder passed through Alex and she could hold back no longer, letting a moan slip from her mouth. She raised her hips off the bed and pushed her jeans over them, down to her thighs, to her knees, her ankles, before kicking them off altogether. "Your turn," she whispered in Peter's ear. He straightened up and undid his belt buckle. Alex helped him with the rest, pulling his jeans down to reveal a pair of plaid shorts.

Peter shrugged. "I wasn't exactly expecting anybody to see my underwear when I got dressed this morning."

"Don't worry," she said. "They're kinda cute." She pushed him over on the bed and stood up, tugging the jeans off his legs. Once they were cast aside, she reached down to her panties, fingers toying with the hem, lingering at the edges. "Do you like mine?" Peter nodded. "Should I take them off?" He hastily nodded again. Alex slipped her thumbs inside the material and slid the panties down to her ankles before stepping out of them.

She could feel Peter's gaze examining her hungrily, his desire to be with her almost overwhelming. She wanted him too, more than anything she'd ever wanted before. Alex climbed back on to the bed, then crawled up the mattress on all fours, her breasts swaying

beneath her, nipples brushing against Peter's body. She reached his bulging shorts and smiled. "I think it's time these came off, too."

Peter lifted his hips off the mattress and hastily removed the last of his clothes. Alex lifted one leg across him and knelt on the mattress, leaning closer to kiss his lips, pressing herself against him. She reached back with one hand and guided him closer, lifting her hips into the air and then lowered them gently, tenderly, until her body and his were touching. A sigh escaped Alex's mouth as he pushed against her, then a tiny whisper of pain as he entered her. She lowered herself further, gasping at the sensation of being slowly filled by him, then sighing again as pleasure overtook her. Alex nestled downward, grinding against him, savoring the feeling of having Peter inside her, being one with him.

"Oh, God," he whispered. "God, that feels good."

She kissed him again and then leaned back so her weight was centered on him, pressing down, forcing him further and further inside. Alex could feel her eyelids fluttering involuntarily, waves of pleasure spreading outward through her body, a warm tingling that extended to her fingertips and toes, as if every nerve inside her was coming alive. She raised her hips a few inches in the air, then slowly lowered them again, each movement more pleasurable than the last. She repeated the motion, faster this time, then again and again and again.

Peter was beyond speaking now, his hands on her hips, guiding Alex's movements, imploring her to go faster, his own hips thrusting upward in response to her. She could feel him tensing beneath her, the muscles in his body tightening, his gasps for breath coming quicker and quicker. Alex felt him let go, and as he did she too was pushed over the brink, crying out his name, begging him to keep going, her body on fire, pushing, grinding, trying to squeeze every last moment of ecstasy from him.

Afterward she collapsed beside him, both of them still gasping for breath, sweat glistening on their bodies, their faces aglow with warmth. Alex hugged herself to Peter, savoring the feeling of his hard body against her softer curves, knowing he was hers and she was his now. They had shared something, something so intimate it had

changed both of them forever. Whatever else happened, this moment, this experience, it was special, precious. I will never forget this, she vowed. Never.

Peter shivered in her arms. "Are you cold?" she asked.

"No," he insisted through chattering teeth.

"You are cold!" Alex said. She pulled the bed covers over both of them. "There, that's better."

"Thanks."

Alex looked at him. "Why were you shivering?"

Peter shrugged. "I don't know. I honestly don't. I've fantasized about, well, that, for so long. Now it's happened. I'm happy. I'm happy it was with you."

She kissed him. "I thought only girls got so emotional about this."

"Guys have feelings too, you know," Peter protested half-heartedly.

Alex slid her hand down to his groin. "I know," she said, smirking.

"How long till your mom gets home?"

"We've got hours yet. What do you want to do?"

"Sleep," Peter admitted. "I'm exhausted. You've tired me out."

"Typical male," she said. "Get what you want, then roll over and snore."

"I didn't notice you complaining before."

"Just teasing." Alex adjusted the pillows beneath their heads. "I'll set the alarm for six to make sure we don't oversleep. I'm not sure Mom is ready for me to have boys stay the night yet."

It was Alex's turn to be teased. "Boys? I'm not the only one?" Peter asked.

She rested a hand across his mouth. "Sleep." Alex snuggled closer to him and closed her eyes. She had never felt safer or more wanted.

***

Heather and Chris sat in Heather's crumpled convertible outside Springwood General, the late afternoon sun warming the air around them. "Are you sure you want to do this?" Chris asked, resting a hand on Heather's shoulder. "I called the hospital and Lloyd's condition hasn't changed."

"They're wrong," she insisted. "Every time I try to sleep, I can hear him in my thoughts, calling for us, crying. He needs our help, Chris."

"How? How can *we* help him?"

"I don't know. I only know he needs us, needs me." She got out of the car and closed the door. "Are you coming?"

Chris hesitated. I should go home, he thought, but I'm not sure I can face it after last night. Chris had walked in after dark on Sunday to find his parents praying at the kitchen table with Reverend Jefferson sitting between them, holding their hands. The priest was quick to claim the credit for Chris's return. "Praise the Lord, the prodigal son has come back. Our prayers have been answered."

But Chris's father was not so forgiving. He stood up to confront the teenager, glaring at him across the table. "Where have you been? Do you have any idea the agony, the worry you have put your mother and me through? Well? Answer me. Where have you been?"

Chris had decided the truth was his best weapon. "I spent the night with a girl. Her name's Heather, Heather Sutherland."

His father had looked at the others. "We don't know anybody by the name of Sutherland."

"She lives here on Elm Street," Chris replied. "She's white."

"I don't care about the color of her skin," Gideon had shouted. "I care about what you're doing to this family, the shame you're bringing upon your mother and me. You stay out all night, fornicating with this whore—"

"Heather is not a whore!" Chris had felt the anger burning inside him, growing hotter by the second, demanding to be let out to be unleashed. "She's a beautiful girl and I love her."

"You don't know the meaning of love," his father snarled back, stalking around the kitchen table toward him. "You only know the pleasure of sin."

"Don't push me," Chris had warned.

"You have the devil inside you," Gideon announced. In the background Chris could see Reverend Jefferson nodding, clutching a Bible in his hands, while Chris's mother was sobbing. "We must cast it out, son."

"There is nothing wrong with me," Chris maintained, backing away from his father. "I just don't believe in the same things as you anymore."

But Gideon kept coming, moving closer, following his retreating son until the two of them were in a corner of the kitchen, Chris unable to escape. "We must drive out this devil, this demon lust. We must save you."

"Amen!" the reverend echoed.

"Get away from me." Chris shouted, but his father reached for him, both hands stretching out. "Don't touch me."

"I must save you, son. I have to save you from yourself."

Chris grabbed his father's wrists. As soon as he did smoke rose from between his fingers and the stench of skin charring and burning filled the air. Gideon cried out in agony. "You're hurting me."

"I told you to stay away," Chris snapped. "But you wouldn't listen."

His father's hands burst into flames, fire running up the palms and along the fingers. Gideon screamed in terror, his cries taken up by Chris's mother. Reverend Jefferson staggered backward, his Bible held up to ward off this evil. "Truly, the devil is within your boy. See how he wields the fires of hell itself."

Chris had released his father, who sank to the floor, hands still aflame. The teenager closed his eyes, fighting to suppress the rage boiling inside, struggling to regain control. He could hear light bulbs exploding throughout the house, one after another.

"Chris!" It was his mother's voice that snapped him back from the brink. "For the love of God, stop this, please."

Chris opened his eyes again and saw her standing by the table, tears running down her face, terror in her eyes. Suddenly he was ashamed, shaken by his loss of control, overwhelmed by his guilt. His father was kneeling on the floor in front of him, the fire gone out now, both hands blackened and smoking like overcooked steaks from a barbecue. Beyond him Reverend Jefferson was cowering in another corner, mumbling a prayer, face trembling with fear.

"Sorry," Chris had whispered. "I'm sorry..."

"Just go," his mother said quietly.

Chris had fled the house, running into the night. Eventually he returned to Heather's place, climbing a barren rose trellis to knock on her bedroom window. She had let him inside and they spent the night on her single bed, huddled together, Chris weeping for himself. How could he ever go home again? How could he ever face his father? How could he hope to explain what was happening, what he was going through? They would never understand.

The prospect of coping with what he had done, the look of pain in his mother's eyes: Chris wasn't ready for that yet. What must they have told Marion? Even visiting Lloyd was preferable to seeing how frightened she would be of him. Nothing could ever be the same again.

"Well?" Heather asked. "Are you coming or not?"

Chris pushed aside all thoughts of going home. He was with Heather now and that was all that mattered. I have to support her through this; that much I know I can do. "Yeah. Let's go." He walked Heather inside, holding her hand. They were a couple now and he had to be there for her. It was the right thing to do. Even his dad might approve of that, one day.

They navigated Springwood General's warren of corridors to find the burns unit at the back of the building. A chubby orderly let them in, introducing himself as Roy. "You're friends of Lloyd. Then you knew the girl who was here yesterday?"

"Kat."

"What happened to her, that was terrible. I still don't know why she did it." Roy smiled sympathetically at the two teenagers. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thanks," Chris responded. "Can we see Lloyd?"

"He's at the far end of the hall, last door on the left. Hit the big red call button above the bed if you need anything."

"Thank you," Heather said. She gripped Chris's hand a little tighter and ventured along the corridor. "I'm scared," she whispered when they reached the door to Lloyd's room.

"Don't be," Chris replied. "I'm right here with you."

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before opening the door.

***

Alex woke abruptly as if someone had shaken her shoulder. She raised her head from the pillow and looked around her room, momentarily disorientated. This was her bedroom, so why did it feel different? Why did *she* feel different? Then she noticed the two sets of clothes scattered across the floor. Someone stirred in bed beside her, pulling the covers closer to them. It was Peter. Alex smiled as she remembered what they had done, how good it had been, how safe she'd felt in his arms as they drifted off to sleep. So what had woken her?

She glanced at the clock on the bedside table: 5:45 pm. The alarm wasn't due to go off for another fifteen minutes and her mother couldn't be home from work yet. Maybe Peter had rolled over in his sleep and disturbed her. Yeah, that must be it. She'd never shared a bed with anyone before, not since climbing in with her parents as a little girl during a thunderstorm or something like that. Their bed had seemed so big, so wide, like some vast sanctuary where nothing could ever hurt you, where you were always safe. But that was years ago.

Alex realized she needed to pee. She slipped off the mattress, doing her best not to wake Peter. He looked so cute under the covers, his nose pressed into her pillows. She retrieved her panties and then got a T-shirt from the pile of clothes inside the closet, being careful not to let the avalanche hidden behind the door escape. Pulling the T-shirt on over her head, she padded into the adjoining bathroom and slid the door shut. Just because we made love a few hours ago, I'm not ready to share everything with Peter yet, she decided. She sat down on the toilet and emptied her bladder, sighing with relief. Afterwards, Alex went to the mirror and stared at her reflection in the glass.

Do I look any different? I know what it's like to be with a man now, to feel him inside me, to be as intimate as any two people can be. Does that make me a woman? Shouldn't the change be visible on my face? Alex was almost disappointed. Her hair was tousled and a crease from the pillowcase was still visible on one cheek, but

otherwise she looked no different from before. So much for all that shit in the romance novels her mom liked to read on holiday. Alex had skimmed through one of them while they were in Mexico before tossing it in the wastebasket. Don't believe everything you read.

"Alex? Where are you?"

She could hear Peter's voice from the bed and smiled. He was real, that was all that mattered. "In the bathroom. I'll be out in a minute. Okay?"

"Okay. Come back to bed."

"Why? What did you have in mind?"

"You'll have to come back in here to find out."

"Don't start without me!" Alex grinned, readjusting her hair in the mirror. She opened a bottle of some designer perfume, a birthday present from her mom, and dabbed a drop of liquid behind each ear. She dripped another between her breasts, for good measure, and then peeled off her T-shirt. "Ready or not, here I come." Alex announced and slid open the bathroom door.

Peter was concealed beneath the covers, his shape obvious even though she couldn't see his face. Guess he wants to play hide and seek, Alex decided. "Oh dear," she said theatrically. "Where could that man of mine have got to?" She strolled across to the bed. "I was sure I left him here a few minutes ago." A giggle escaped from the bed. "Perhaps I should check to make sure..." She reached for the covers and pulled them aside, her face beaming. "Surprise!"

Krueger was crouched on the bed, his left hand clamped over Peter's face while the fingerknives twitched in the air. "Surprise yourself, bitch!"

"Fuck!" Alex stumbled back, suddenly aware she was vulnerable and defenseless. "You can't be here. We can't be dreaming, we both took—"

"These?" Krueger held up a bottle of Hypnocil, shaking the contents. The pills inside sounded like a rattlesnake. The monster laughed malevolently. "I only need one of you to start dreaming, then all of you fall under my control."

"You don't control us, you bastard." Alex shouted.

"Wrong, he replied. "I own you, all of you."

Peter struggled against Krueger's grasp, trying to free himself. The monster smiled, the scarred flesh of his face twisting into a sneer. "Seems this little fucker disagrees with me. I'll have to show him the error of his ways." Krueger rested one of his blades against Peter's chest, letting the edge press into the skin, threatening to break the surface and plunge into the body. Krueger slid the knife downward, past Peter's nipples and over the stomach, through the downy hair on his abdomen, moving ever closer to the darker curls of his crotch.

"Please, don't." Alex begged.

"Why not?"

"It's me you want, isn't it?" she asked. "I thought I was your favorite."

"Daddy's little girl," he agreed, nodding. "Come to Daddy."

"Not until you let Peter go."

"Why should I?"

Alex swallowed and let her hands fall to her sides, baring herself to him. "I'll make it worth your while."

"Alex, don't do—" Peter cried out.

Krueger silenced him with a single blow, smashing his bare hand across Peter's face, knocking the teenager unconscious. Krueger got off the bed and stood up, his gloved hand flexing at his side. "What did you have in mind?" he asked, stepping closer to Alex. She retreated from him slowly, drawing him closer to the bathroom.

"You're the one in control. Tell me what you like. Tell me what you want."

"You can be my little girl," Krueger said huskily, almost panting.

Alex took another step backward. "Yes."

"You want me to touch you."

Another step. "Yes."

"Say it!" Krueger hissed.

"I want you to touch me."

"Call me Daddy."

Alex retreated another step. "I want you to touch me, Daddy."

"You want me to hurt you."

She was level with the bathroom door, her feet touching the edge of the tiled floor. Alex took another step backward, keeping her eyes

fixed on his cruel face, not looking at the fingerknives as they twitched hungrily by his side. "Yes, Daddy," she whispered. "I want you to hurt me."

Krueger looked her up and down. "Spread your legs," he commanded.

Alex did as she was told. She also reached her arms out sideways. "Yes, Daddy."

His blades reached for her. "I'm gonna cut you. I'm gonna make you bleed."

Alex smiled at him triumphantly. "You're welcome to try, asshole!" Her right hand grabbed the bathroom door and yanked it sideways, slamming it shut on Krueger's arm, pinning his wrist against the wooden frame. The gloved hand was trapped on Alex's side while the rest of his body was still in the bedroom. Krueger howled, the cry of an animal, a beast, part agony and part rage. The blades on his gloved hand flexed uselessly, unable to find anything to hurt. Alex eased the door open a fraction, then slammed it shut on his arm again, then again, then again, then again, over and over until black blood began pouring from the crushed wrist, running down the side of the door and its frame, staining their white surfaces.

One final push and the door slammed shut altogether, severing Krueger's wrist. The gloved hand fell to the bathroom floor, syrupy blood draining across the white surface, the blades still in spasm, clattering against the tiles. Alex could hear him screaming with rage in the bedroom, beating his remaining fist against the door. "You'll pay for that, bitch! I'm gonna cut you in two! I'm gonna slice you up and rip you apart! You don't know the meaning of pain, till you've had Daddy inside you!"

"How you going hurt me now, you sick fuck?" Alex screamed back at him. "I've got your fingerknives in here with me. I'm in control now!"

"Is that what you think?" Krueger snarled, a bestial aspect to his voice. "What about your little boyfriend? He's still in here with me. Just think what I can do to him. If you won't be my little bitch, I'll have to use him instead."

Alex staggered back from the door. Shit, she'd forgotten about Peter. Fuck, what was she going to do? A skittering noise from the floor grabbed her attention. Krueger's severed hand was crawling across the tiles, digging its blades into the ceramic edges, dragging itself toward her toes. "Shit!" Alex jumped aside and then pounced on the gloved hand, grasping it firmly. The fingers curled and fought, trying to free themselves, but she tightened her grip, staying in control. "Now, let's see how you like a taste of your own fucking medicine," she muttered darkly.

Alex ripped open the bathroom door to see Krueger crouched on top of Peter. Her lover had regained consciousness but seemed frozen with fear. Krueger was using the bloody stump where his gloved hand had been to stroke the side of Peter's terrified face, each caress leaving a fresh smear of black blood. "He's mine now," Krueger snarled at Alex. "You've had your fun with him, bitch. Now it's my turn!" He turned back to his captive. "Come to Daddy, Peter."

FOURTEEN

Heather sat with Lloyd for nearly an hour, but he never spoke, never moved, never acknowledged her presence. Chris stayed in a corner by the window, looking out at the hospital's grounds, refusing to approach the bed. Heather couldn't understand Chris's reluctance. They had all been there when Lloyd ripped his face off; they had all seen what happened. Sure, Lloyd wasn't really their friend or anything, but he hadn't deserved what Krueger did to him. Shouldn't they be showing Lloyd they cared? Someone cleared their throat at the door. Heather looked across to see Roy standing in the corridor.

"Sorry to disturb you, but visiting hours are over. Strictly speaking, they were over a while back, but Lloyd hasn't had many visitors so I didn't like to mention it before," he said sadly.

Heather nodded. "A couple more minutes?"

"Okay." She waited until Roy was out of earshot before speaking.

"Chris, what is your problem?"

"What problem?"

"You've been hiding in that corner since we got here."

Chris turned to face her and Lloyd. "I'm afraid," he said.

"Afraid? Of what?"

"Of losing control. Of ending up like him."

Heather went to Chris, taking his hands in her own. "That won't happen. I trust you. Why don't you trust yourself?"

"Because..." Chris sighed and told her what had happened the previous night, why he'd fled from his family and stayed in her room. "I don't want to hurt you, Heather. I feel like I'm losing my mind, like everything and everyone I love is slipping away from me, out of my control."

She slipped her arms around Chris and hugged him, pressing her head against his chest. "You're not losing me. You'll never lose me."

He kissed the top of her head. "I hope not."

Heather smiled up at him. Dating a basketball player had some advantages—boy, was he in great shape—but the height difference was not one of them. "We better go." She broke free and returned to

Lloyd's bedside, reaching out a hand to touch the bandages covering his face. "We'll come back tomorrow, okay? Hang in there." Heather leaned on the bed, the tips of her fingers brushing against Lloyd's hand.

All the lights in the room began to flicker, pulsing brightly for a moment before fading to nothing. Outside the window black clouds were gathering across the sky, blotting out the sunset, choking light from the room. "What the hell?" Chris muttered, peering at the malfunctioning light fittings on the wall. As he approached one bulb it exploded, showering him with shards of hot glass.

The door slammed closed of its own accord, the lock securing itself. Chris tried but couldn't undo the lock, the bolt apparently fused shut. He turned and looked at Heather. "I can't move it. We're trapped."

"What's causing this?"

You are, another voice replied.

Heather felt the hairs along the back of her neck standing up. She knew that voice; she recognized it. But more disturbing was the source. Lloyd's eyes were open, but instead of pupils all she could see through the gaps in his bandages were black, empty sockets, trickles of blood dripping from each hollow wound. "Shit!" She stepped backward, getting as far away from the bed as she could. Lloyd slowly rose from the mattress, bending forward at the stomach, his back ramrod straight, like he was being folded by unseen hands.

You did this, Lloyd said. No, that wasn't right, Heather realized. Lloyd's lips were moving, she could see that, but it wasn't his voice speaking. It was another person. It was Kat. Stranger still, Heather wasn't hearing the words from Lloyd's mouth, they were being spoken directly into her mind, the same way she'd heard Simone's thoughts at the mall. You left me to die. *You abandoned me. I might still be alive if you two hadn't been so obsessed with each other, with yourselves.*

"No, that's not true." Heather shouted back.

"We didn't know," Chris added.

Didn't know? Or didn't want to know?

"We didn't mean for you to get hurt," Heather pleaded.

That's rich, bitch! Like you ever cared about me.

"I did. I was your friend."

Don't make me laugh. All you ever cared about was yourself. Pretty little Heather, prom queen in waiting. Give it twenty years, you'll be a lush like your poor mom, another white trash wipe-out. You don't give a shit about Chris. You're just using this poor bastard to get back at her. She's gonna shit when she finds out you're jumping a black boy's bones, isn't she?

Heather shook her head. "You're wrong."

"Leave us alone," Chris shouted, striding towards the bed.

Or what? You'll do to me what you did to your father?

"How did you...? How could you...?"

You're gonna burn me too? Go on, show us what a real man you are. Show us how you fight fire with fire.

Chris clamped his hands over his head. "I don't have to listen to this."

But you do. You're nearly as bad as this bitch. Always thinking about yourself, worrying about what's going to happen to you. Get over yourself, why don't you? The world doesn't revolve around your problems, asshole!

"Get out of my head," Chris shouted. "Get the fuck out of my head."

Not before I've said my piece.

"Leave us alone," Heather cried, her face wet with tears. "Why don't you leave us alone?"

Lloyd's head twisted around to face her. *Because I don't want to. Because I want you two to suffer like I've suffered. Because I want everyone to suffer, bitch.*

***

Alex rushed at Krueger, drawing back the fingerknives, ready to stab the bastard through his black heart. He spun round and grabbed her arm as it lunged downward, stopping the attack. "Didn't your mom tell you? Never run with scissors or sharp knives in your hands," he said, grinning evilly. Krueger tightened his grip on Alex's

forearm: squeezing, clenching, and grinding the bones of her wrist together in his grasp. She cried out in pain and dropped the gloved hand. Krueger bent down and pressed the bloody stump of his arm against it. When he straightened up, the two were reattached. Krueger flexed his fingerknives with relish, clearly enjoying the sensation of being back in one piece. Alex staggered away from him, disbelieving what she saw with her own eyes. "But that's impossible." she protested. "You can't do that."

Krueger shook his head. "This is a dream, bitch. Nothing is impossible here. This is my realm, my world, my domain. I make the rules; I'm in charge. As for you..." He leaned closer, his tongue licking his lips. A stray maggot crawled out from inside his mouth and fell to the floor, squirming and twisting as it tumbled away. "You obey me."

"Never," Alex vowed.

Krueger grabbed her by the throat with his gloved hand, the blades closing around her neck, each razor-sharp edge pressing against the skin, threatening to slice through the epidermis. "Still fighting? Good. I like it when they put up a battle, show some spirit. Not like your little boyfriend there." Behind Krueger Alex could see Peter, curled into a fetal position, frightened hands shaking before his terrified face, teeth chattering, sweat glistening on his brow. "Don't expect that pussy to save you. He's too scared to give a shit about you too worried about saving his own precious skin."

"Go fuck yourself," Alex spat at him.

"No, no, no," Krueger replied with a wolfish smile. "You should be begging *me* to fuck you, you little slut." He stepped behind Alex, his fingerknives still clenched around her throat, his other hand caressing her breasts, fingers cruelly twisting her nipples, pawing at her. "Now, beg."

"Peter," Alex whispered. "Help me."

Krueger's hand slid down her flat stomach toward the waistband of her panties, the scarred skin of his fingers scratching coarsely over Alex's abdomen. "I told you to beg," he hissed in her ear. "Beg for Daddy."

"No, please," Alex cried, her voice cracking, ashamed for letting this monster know her fear and letting him know just how much he frightened her. His voice was a rancid breath of decay, the stench of rotting flesh and hatred pushing into her mouth, filling her lungs, penetrating her body. She could feel his fingers toying with the material of her panties, every part of her squirming in revulsion. She couldn't let this creature have her, touch her—not like that, not down there.

"I said beg!" he demanded.

"Alright," Alex said meekly. "But let me look into your eyes when I do it."

"That's better," Krueger panted, relaxing his grip on her throat.

"Alex, no!" Peter cried out. "Don't do this. Don't give in to him."

"Shut up, pussy." Krueger shouted, flicking his fingerknives at Peter. The sheets wrapped themselves around the teenager, gagging his mouth, pinning his arms and legs down, holding him immobile.

Alex slowly turned to face Krueger, fixing his gaze with her own. "Please, Daddy..."

"Yes?"

"Please, Daddy. I want you to..." She let her voice trail off, looking away from him coyly, biting her bottom lip like a small child too shy to ask for some candy. Krueger moved closer, visibly enjoying the performance, the front of his blood-stained jeans bulging, his breath quickening.

"Yes? What do you want me to do?"

Alex glared back at him. "I want you to rot in hell, fucker!" She rammed her right knee up into his crotch with all her energy. Krueger crumpled over, air shooting from his mouth, his voice a feeble cry of agony. Alex jumped aside as he fell, escaping his grasp. She ran to Peter and helped him free, the sheets loosening their grip while Krueger was debilitated.

"You'll suffer for that," Krueger snarled from the floor. "You'll wish you'd never been born, bitch!"

"Fuck you, Krueger!" Alex shouted back. "I wish you'd never been born." She pointed at the clock on her bedside table. The digital display showed the time was 5:59 pm. "I've been keeping you busy

until six. Once that alarm goes off, Peter and I will wake up. We'll escape to somewhere you can't get to us!"

"Look closer," Krueger snarled, pointing at the clock. Its power cable had been ripped from the wall. The display was stalled at 5:59.

"Shit," she whispered.

"You're coming with me, both of you. Time for a little show and tell."

"Where are we going?" Peter asked.

"Guess."

Alex closed her eyes, already knowing what would soon surround them. "The boiler room, where Krueger takes all his victims."

"There's no place like home," the monster replied.

***

Heather couldn't hold back any longer. She screamed, her hands clenched into fists, eyes squeezed tightly shut, every part of her crying out in anguish. The sound took on a life of its own, becoming more than noise, rippling outward. On the other side of the bed Chris had collapsed, his face stricken with agony, blood dripping from his nostrils and ears. Lloyd's body went into spasm too, falling back on to the mattress, crimson stains spreading across the bandages to create a red mask of pain, screaming lips and teeth imprinted on his dressings. Heather kept screaming and screaming and screaming until she could scream no more, every ounce of strength drained from her. She sank to the floor, her mouth hanging open. No sound emerged from it anymore. A weak stream of bile spilled from her lips, dripping green and yellow on to the floor. Outside, it had turned pitch black. No light was visible, not even the illumination of a distant street light. Weak emergency lighting from a fire exit sign above the door provided the only glimmer of hope in the hospital room.

Chris stirred on the floor. "What happened?"

Heather coughed and spat, trying to clear the puke and mucus from her mouth. "Krueger's got us. We must have fallen asleep."

"How can you tell?"

She tapped the side of her head. "I can hear him. He's calling to us."

"Fuck that!" Chris replied. "We're getting out of here."

Heather stood up, her legs still weakened by the attack on her mind. "You don't get it, do you? He brought us here and he won't let us go until he's done."

"So, what? We're supposed to wait around here till that bastard shows his ugly face?"

Heather walked to the door. "It's this way. Come on."

Chris folded his arms, refusing to leave. "No fucking way. He wants me, he can come and get me himself."

"Follow the bitch," Krueger's voice hissed, the words escaping from Lloyd's mouth. "Or else I kill this one here and now."

Chris looked at the possessed body. "I'm not afraid of you, Krueger. I think you're a pussy, trying to push us around. I'm not jumping at your command, you hear me?"

No sooner had he finished speaking than the life support machines clustered around Lloyd's bed began to die, powering down and switching off one by one.

"You don't scare us, Krueger." Chris shouted. "We know this isn't real. It's another one of your fucking nightmares, another illusion."

Lloyd's lips moved again. "If this little shit dies in your dream, then he dies in real life too. You realize that, don't you?"

Chris punched the red call button above the bed but nothing happened.

"Do as he says, Chris," Heather urged. "Don't kill Lloyd trying to show you're not scared."

"But I—"

"We're all scared, okay?"

Chris sighed before finally relenting. "Alright, Krueger, you win. Let Lloyd live." But the machines stayed dead, displaying no signs of improvement. "I'll do what you want, Krueger. Let him live."

Finally, a faint bleeping resumed on the heart monitor. Gradually the other machines came back to life as well. Chris joined Heather at the door. "So, where do we go from here?"

"Outside," she said, a tremor of fear in her voice. The lock on the door undid itself with a dull, ominous *thunk*. "Into his domain."

***

Alex opened her eyes again. She and Peter were standing in the boiler room, surrounded by rusting metal and hissing steam. "We're here."

Peter peered around, trying to make out their surroundings. "Where's here? I can't see a thing without my glasses."

"Trust me," Alex said sadly, "you're better off that way. Krueger craves our pain, our fear, and our terror. It makes him stronger."

"I don't know what's worse," Peter replied, his voice shivering. "Not seeing or not knowing what's coming."

Footsteps became audible. One, no, two people were approaching, Alex thought. The sound seemed to be coming from above. "Is anyone there?"

"Alex? Is that you?"

"Heather? We're down here."

"Hold on, we'll be right with you," another voice called.

Alex recognized that one as Chris. So, Krueger was bringing them all together. Somehow, that scared her more than having to fight him alone. It proved how much they were in his thrall, mere pawns to be moved or sacrificed at his whim. Put more simply, she thought, we're all in deep shit here.

Heather and Chris emerged from the clouds of steam. The two girls hugged sympathetically while Chris and Peter nodded at each other. "Do you know why we're here?" Heather asked.

"Krueger said something about show and tell," Alex said, shrugging.

"The sick bastard, he's fucking with us," Chris protested. "First Lloyd, then Kat, now all of us together."

"I don't want to die," Peter murmured. "Not down here, not like this."

The others all looked at him.

Peter shrugged. "Shit, that's what we're all thinking, right?"

"I guess," Heather agreed.

"So why not say it?"

"Because it gives me strength," Krueger interjected. The four youths spun around to see him standing on top of a massive metal cylinder. "Your pain, your fear, your misery—all of it—it tastes so sweet. Isn't that right, Alex?"

"Why are you asking me?" She could feel everyone's eyes upon her.

"Because you know about that fine line between pleasure and pain. We've walked that line before. It's an old friend of ours."

"Shut up, Krueger."

"Have you told lover boy yet how you got those scars on your arms? It wasn't an accident, Peter, oh no. She likes pain; she enjoys it. She gets off on it. Your little slut used to take a razor blade left behind by her precious daddy and slice through her skin for kicks. It's her dirty little secret. She used to tell herself the pain was her friend, her only comfort, her only refuge. You know the worst part of it, the thing she could never admit, even to herself?"

Peter shook his head helplessly.

"I said shut up," Alex shouted.

Krueger sneered happily. "She began to enjoy hurting herself. It gave her a thrill, cutting into the skin, seeing the blood flow, penetrating her body, violating herself with the edge of a blade."

"Shut the fuck up," Alex screamed.

"I wouldn't be surprised if she hasn't got cuts on other places besides her arms." Krueger jumped down from the metal cylinder, landing with a thump on the boiler room floor, his fingerknives glinting in the pale, yellow light. "Well, Peter, you've seen every inch of her body. Got anything you'd like to share with the rest of the group? Any little scars in strange places where they shouldn't be? Any telltale wounds that caught your eye?"

Peter hung his head, backing a step away from Krueger. But the monster kept taunting the teenager. "You thought she enjoyed every second in bed with you, but I'll bet she was thinking about me the whole time, about how sweet it would be to have me touch her, hurt her, cut her. Maybe she even fantasized about places I could put my blades." Krueger swung around to face Alex. "Isn't that right? You

know you want me, bitch." He winked at Heather and Chris. "You can see why she's my favorite. Daddy's little girl, so hungry for me to make her bleed."

"Leave her alone," Chris said, stepping in front of the sobbing Alex.

Krueger smirked to Peter, jerking a thumb at the jock. "See? This is what a real man does to protect his bitch."

"I said leave her alone, shitbag!"

"Or what? You gonna burn me like you burnt your dad?" Krueger pointed at the scar tissue covering his face. "News flash, hotshot, I'm already done."

"Doesn't mean you can't burn again, bastard." Chris lunged at Krueger, but he was too slow. The monster grabbed Chris's wrists and forced them together. As they touched flames burst from each hand, engulfing them. The fire quickly spread along Chris's arms and across his chest, the dancing yellow and orange tongues of heat searing the underside of his chin. Chris screamed in agony and anguish, his clothes alight, his skin starting to cook.

"Stop it!" Heather shouted. "Stop hurting him."

"Why should I?"

"He's done nothing to you, none of us have. We're innocent."

"Innocent!" Krueger let go of Chris and laughed. The tall teenager fell heavily to the floor, his hands beating at the flames still burning on his chest, coughing and choking on the smoke rising from his own clothes and body. Krueger pointed at Chris while glaring at Heather.

"You want to know his secret, sweetie? Your boyfriend hates himself, hates everything about his life. He pushes himself to the limit, excelling at all he does, but that's self-inflicted punishment, an escape from the empty, hollow nothing inside him where he thinks his soul should be. Your precious Chris doesn't believe in anything: not in God, not in love and especially not in you."

"You're lying," Heather maintained. "I know him. I love him."

"Tell her I'm wrong," Krueger bent down beside Chris and whispered in his ear. "Say you love her too."

Chris didn't reply. Instead he stayed on the floor, nursing his scorched hands, rocking back and forth on his haunches.

Krueger straightened up again. "Guess that's a no."

Heather shook her head. "I don't believe you, Krueger. You're twisting our words, our thoughts, trying to make us despair, make us surrender to you. It won't happen. We're stronger than you and that's why you need us."

He sneered at her. "And the beautiful Heather, what's your little secret? What dark truth do you keep hidden deep inside you, buried away where you think nobody can find it?"

"I haven't got any secrets," she replied, her voice close to cracking.

Krueger touched her face with his left hand, stroking her cheek tenderly like a doting parent. "Such a beautiful face, but such an ugly person inside it. Isn't that the truth? Isn't that what you think of yourself?"

Heather shook her head, trying to deny his words. He sniggered at her.

"The truth is you hate your body. Why else torment it? You gorge on junk food, then shove your fingers down your throat and puke it all back up again. You smoke to keep your weight down; at least, that's what you tell yourself. But maybe you hate your body so much you want to give it cancer, maybe that's the real reason. People call me sick and twisted. They should look inside the psyche of every teenager in America. You people are more fucked up than I could ever be."

Krueger swiveled round and pointed at Peter. A damp patch appeared on the front of the teenager's jeans, spreading outward from the crotch. "Last, but not least, Alex's little bitch. In case you hadn't noticed, Peter is a coward. He pissed his pants because I just looked at him. Imagine what would happen if I ever touched him with my four little friends?" Krueger flicked out the fingerknives on his right hand. "Imagine what I could do with these, the exquisite agonies I could inflict upon you. Imagine all of that, then try to defy me, you little shit!" Krueger gestured at Alex, Chris and Heather. "At least they tried to fight back. You haven't got the balls for that. I'm surprised you could even get it up enough to satisfy Alex at all. Then again, maybe you didn't. A real man would have had her gasping, moaning, crying out for more. But maybe she was faking it the whole time. Have you thought about that, you little pussy?" Krueger spat

venomously, his phlegm sizzling as it hit the floor. "You make me sick, all of you," he sneered.

"If you hate us so much, why bring us here?" Alex asked. "Why not kill us and get your kicks that way?"

Krueger almost smiled. "I'm not going to let you get away from me now, not after the talents I've given each of you."

"Talents? You've cursed us, more like."

"You say potato, I say shut the fuck up, bitch!" he snarled back at her. "I made you, all of you, and I can break you just as easily. Just ask Kat."

"We can't," Chris replied from the floor. "She's dead. You killed her."

"Kat's my bitch now," Krueger said happily. A sudden gust of cold, bone-chilling wind blew through the boiler room, sweeping away the clouds of steam. Suddenly, Kat came into view. She was pinned to a wall by her own skin. It had been peeled back from her body in sections and nailed to the wall, suspending her above the floor. A thousand narrow-bladed knives hung in the air, the point of each facing Kat. The knives stabbed into her body, piercing flesh and muscles, puncturing every inch of her. Then, they withdrew several feet and hung in the air again. Kat opened her eyes and looked at her friends. "Kill me," she whispered hoarsely. "Please, kill m—" Her words were cut off by the hail of knives stabbing her again. The steam clouds closed around Kat once more, hiding her agonies from view, but her screams of pain still rent the air.

"For the love of God, stop this," Heather sobbed.

"There is no God," Krueger replied, holding aloft his gloved hand. "Here, this is God."

"Why are you showing us this?" Alex demanded, spitting the words at him like weapons.

"I want you to see what happens if you disobey me," Krueger said. "I want you to realize even death is no escape from me."

"You've proved your point. Now, what do you want?"

"You were shit before I found you—sleepwalkers stumbling through life, knowing you were meant for something better, but not knowing what that was. Each of you felt the same: trapped, unable to

find a meaning for your pathetic lives. Now you've found it. I am that meaning."

"Bullshit," Chris snapped. "You're a sick fuck who gets his kicks torturing kids."

Krueger shook his head. "You should be grateful to me. I crept into the dreams of those scientists and showed them how to create that drug that awakened you all. I thrive on terror, fear and pain. You will spread my terror, so I can grow stronger."

"We'll never work for you, Krueger," Alex replied, her voice like steel.

"You're wrong," he said, proudly displaying the finger knives on his gloved hand. "You shall become my disciples, one for each of my blades. You kill for me," his smile faded, "or I will kill you. It's your choice." Krueger folded his arms triumphantly. "Welcome to my nightmare!"

FIFTEEN

Heather jerked her hand away from Lloyd. She was in his hospital room again, bewildered to find herself in the same place as before. Chris was still standing in the corner by the window where he had been when they were hugging. He looked like she felt, displaced and dazed. It seemed like hours had passed since her fingers brushed Lloyd's skin.

"Did you see all of that?" Chris asked.

"All of what?"

"Krueger, he took us to his boiler room and showed us Kat being tortured."

Heather nodded. "And he gave us a choice: kill for him or be killed."

Chris's head sagged forward. "I was hoping it was only me, but if you saw too..."

"Then Alex and Peter must have been in the nightmare as well. Krueger can bring us all together whenever he wants." Heather bit her fingernails. "How can he manipulate us so easily?"

"That's the least of our problems," Chris said. "We have to decide whether we want to be his pawns, or else..."

"Or end up like Kat." Heather felt overwhelmed by a cold, numbing dread. Everything she'd seen while touching Lloyd was all true. Somehow, she knew that within twenty-hours they would either all be dead or Krueger's slaves, killing for a killer. She approached Chris, fear chilling her. "Hold me. Please."

***

Alex was woken by the alarm clock ringing on her bedside table. It was six. She rolled over to switch it off and was startled to find Peter next to her. He suddenly sat up in bed, hands clutching the covers like a security blanket. "No, I won't do it! You can't make—" Peter abruptly stopped speaking, noticing Alex was beside him in the bed,

staring at him. "Oh, thank God. I thought he was going to kill me, kill all of us..." His voice trailed off. "I was having another nightmare."

Alex rested one of her hands on his shoulder, trying to soothe Peter. "I know. I saw it too. I guess we all did."

"But shouldn't the Hypnocil have protected us?"

"Krueger's found a way to overcome it," Alex decided. The sound of someone coming up the stairs caught her attention. Oh shit, Mom's home and I've got a naked boy in my bed. Alex shoved Peter on to the floor while searching for her panties. "You've got to hide. Now."

"Where?"

"Just do it, okay?" Alex hissed.

There was a knock on her door. "Hey, Alex, I'm home. I thought I'd see..." Joyce opened the door and glanced inside, her voice trailing off. Alex was lying on the bed, one arm over her breasts while her other hand lingered near her crotch. She did her best to look surprised and angry.

"Mom! What the hell are you doing? Can't I have any privacy?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize..." Joyce's mouth was still working but words seemed to fail her. Instead she blushed a deep red, embarrassed at having walked in on her daughter doing heavens knows what. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Jesus, Mom, chill out, okay?" Alex pulled the sheet up over herself. "I wasn't doing anything... you know..."

"Of course not." Joyce's gaze began to wander toward the pile of discarded garments on the floor. "It's just that..."

Alex realized she would have a hard time explaining how Peter's clothes were in her room. "I'm fine," she said quickly, trying to distract her mom's gaze. "I can take care of myself, okay?"

"I wish that were true. I came home early because the doctor's office called to say that you never turned up for your appointment."

"I told you I wouldn't," Alex snapped back. In truth she'd forgotten about it, having been too busy getting Peter into her bed. But even if she had remembered, she wouldn't have gone. It was too late for that shit.

Joyce shook her head. "Put some clothes on and come downstairs. I need to talk to you." She retreated to the door. "Do you want

anything?"

"Some peace and quiet would be nice," Alex muttered sarcastically.

"I meant do you want a drink, Alexandra."

Alex frowned, embarrassed by her own petulance. "Sorry. A Coke."

"Fine. I'll see you downstairs in a minute."

When her mom was gone, Alex glanced across at the bathroom, half expecting to see black blood spattered on the white tiles. That had all been part of the nightmare too, but sleeping with Peter, that was real. Alex realized they hadn't used any protection. Peter had been a virgin, too, so she was probably safe from any infections, but that wouldn't stop her from getting pregnant. Fuck it, she decided. If Krueger has his way we'll probably be dead before the week is out. Getting knocked up is the least of my problems.

Jesus, everything was such a mess. A week ago she'd been just another student at Springwood High, a ghost trying to blend into the background, a teenage girl with a history of psychiatric problems and a father figure fixation. Now she was under penalty of death from a psychopathic maniac in her dreams, had lost her virginity to a math geek and could well be on her way to joining America's teenage pregnancy statistics. Amazing how much could change in a few days. Christ only knows what the next few would bring.

"Is it safe?" a timid voice asked from beneath the bed.

"For the moment," Alex replied. "You can come out now."

Peter emerged from hiding, hands clutched over his genitals. He grinned mischievously. "Almost getting caught, that was kind of exciting."

"Forget it," Alex said, shaking her head. "I think even Mom would notice if we went for an encore right now. You better get dressed."

"Okay." He recovered his clothes and started pulling them on.

"I'll go downstairs and keep her busy in the kitchen. Once you hear us talking, you can go out the front door, but *quietly*. Avoid the third step from the bottom, it always creaks. Call me when you get home so I know you got back safely, okay?" Alex pulled out a T-shirt from a drawer and put it on over her head before stepping into her jeans. Before leaving the room she stopped and gave Peter a deep, passionate kiss. "Thank you," she whispered.

"What for?"

"For making my first time… special."

"You were the one in control," he said bashfully, "I didn't really know what I was doing."

"It was good," Alex said, kissing him again. "It was better than good."

"Well, practice makes perfect." Peter suggested playfully.

Alex shoved him back on the bed and retreated to the door. "Remember, keep off the third step from the bottom."

***

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Heather and Chris were parked outside his home. It was dusk by the time they arrived, and a handful of lights were on inside the house. Heather stroked his face, concern etched on her features.

He nodded. "I have to, Alex was right. Krueger has tainted us all and he's trying to make us into monsters like him. I have to face the consequences of what I've done, it's the only way to make peace with my family, with my father. I've resented the way he runs my life for so long but I've got to stop hating him. If I don't let go of my hate, I'll end up like Krueger. We all will."

Heather smiled. "You'll never be like him, Chris."

He got out, pausing to kiss her goodnight. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Where?"

"At the graveyard. We should pay our last respects to Kat. Her family will have left by one, we could meet then."

"I'll tell the others," she volunteered.

"Thanks." Chris smiled at her. "Wish me luck."

"I'll pray for you," Heather replied, surprising herself. She hadn't prayed since she was a little girl. But she hadn't believed in monsters since she was a child either, so asking God—if there was a God—for his help didn't seem strange anymore. I need to have something to believe in, Heather decided.

***

Alex found her mom talking with a stranger in the kitchen. He was tall and middle-aged, brown hair thinning above an intelligent face. The man was dressed in a dark blue suit, and a doctor's bag was resting by his legs. This didn't look good, Alex decided. This didn't look good at all.

"Who's this?" she demanded.

"Alex, this is Dr Taubmann," Joyce replied. "Since you missed your appointment with him today, I asked if he'd make a home visit."

"You brought a shrink here?"

"I'm not a shrink," Taubmann began, smiling at Alex benignly. "While I do maintain a psychiatric practice here in Springwood, I'm actually a specialist in the field of adolescent and juvenile alienation."

"A shrink that likes playing with children," Alex sneered. "Terrific. There's a name for people like you."

"Alexandra!" Joyce snapped. "There is no need to be abusive. Dr Taubmann has kindly given up his evening to talk with you. He didn't come here to be insulted or attacked."

"Then he came to the wrong house." Alex could hear Peter creeping down the stairs behind her and kept her voice raised, hoping it would cover his departure. "I don't need another egghead telling me I suffer from alienation. I'm a teenager, for fuck's sake. That's what we do."

"Your concerns are understandable..." Taubmann began.

"Bite me," Alex spat back. She heard the front door click shut. "Look, I know you both mean well but this isn't going to solve anything, okay?"

"How do you know if you don't give it a chance?" Taubmann persisted.

"Please, honey," Joyce said, desperation evident in her voice. "For me?"

Alex sighed. "Okay. Where do you want me?"

Taubmann smiled. "On the couch is traditional."

She rolled her eyes. "Great, now he's a comedian too."

"Alex..." her mom warned.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Give him a chance." She stalked into the lounge and threw herself on the couch. Taubmann and Joyce followed her in. "Will this do?"

The psychiatrist nodded. He removed a notepad and pen from his bag. "Mrs Corwin, could you dim the lights? And it's for the best if you take the phone off the hook. We don't wish to be disturbed."

"Bit late for that, isn't it?" Alex joked as she watched him prepare for their session. "And what do we have for contestant number one, Dr Taubmann? Inkblots? Word association? Memory regression?"

He smiled thinly. "Hypnosis. Tell me, are you on any medication?"

"Hypnocil, for all the good it's doing."

"Hypnocil?" Joyce asked.

"It's a dream suppressant," Taubmann said. "Interesting. Still, it shouldn't interfere with the procedure. Alexandra, if you'd like to rel—"

"My name's Alex," she protested.

"Fine." He switched on a penlight and shone the beam into her eyes. "Alex, if you'd like to relax. Empty your head of all thoughts and listen to the sound of my voice. Let my words soothe you, let them push away all your cares and worries and concerns. Let yourself go, let everything go, let your imagination roam freely. Now, imagine yourself afloat on an ocean."

Alex could feel her eyelids getting heavier. She wanted to stay awake, to make a nonsense of his supposed expertise, but sheer exhaustion was getting the better of her. It'd been too long since she'd slept properly, without dreams, without nightmares, without fear or terror of what she'd find when she opened her eyes again. The darkness washed over her, around her, warm like an embrace, comforting and familiar.

***

Peter closed the back door at his house and smiled. Being with Alex, it was everything he'd ever imagined and more. The way she'd touched him, guided him, let him be inside her... just thinking about it was getting him excited again. Then Peter remembered the

nightmare that had followed and his smile faded. He thought about Krueger's gloating, the shame of peeing himself in front of the others. It was only a nightmare but they'd seen it; they'd all witnessed his humiliation. He never wanted that to happen again.

"Where the fuck have you been?" a voice slurred from a corner of the kitchen. Peter looked around the breakfast counter and found his father on the floor, clutching a bottle of Jim Beam in one hand, a revolver in the other.

"Dad, are you okay?"

"Do I look okay to you?"

"What's going on? Where'd you get the gun?"

"Didn't know I had this, did you? Kept it a secret all these years." Peter's father pulled a box of ammunition from the breast pocket of his shirt and tipped the contents out on the kitchen floor. He began loading bullets into the revolver, his fingers fumbling with each round before shoving them into place.

"How long have you been drinking?" Peter asked, his eyes noticing the remains of an empty Jim Beam bottle shattered against a nearby wall.

"Long enough," his father slurred. "Why? You want some?"

"No, Dad, I'm fine," Peter said, trying to humor him.

"Good. I ain't sharing my drink with no sissy boy."

"What did you call me?"

Peter's father sneered. "You heard."

"How can you say that? I'm your son."

"You ain't no son of mine." Mr O'Mahoney finished loading the revolver and then took another swig from the bottle. "Looking down your nose at me, thinking you're better than you are. You don't know the half of it, boy. You should be down on your knees, thanking me for taking in your slut of a mother."

Peter could feel his face reddening with anger. "What did you say?"

"Your mother was a little whore. She fucked every player on the football team that summer. She was good, I'll give her that."

"Don't talk about Mom like that," Peter warned.

"When she went down on you, it felt like all your Christmases were coming at once, you know what I mean?"

"I said don't talk about Mom like that."

"Course, she got knocked up, bad girls always do, and somebody had to marry the slut. We drew lots in the locker room. Guess who lost?"

"I don't want to hear this," Peter said, shaking his head.

"So I walked down the aisle, her five months gone and it showing plenty by then. Why'd you think we never had any wedding photos in the house?"

"Shut up, you old bastard."

"No, you're the bastard, boy. You certainly ain't my son, that's for damn sure. No son of mine spends all his time reading books and staying indoors and playing with himself. Don't think I don't know what you do up there, you little pervert. Beating off over your computer, acting like you've got a pair. You make me sick!" Peter's father tried pulling himself to his feet but collapsed back to the floor again, defeated by his inebriated legs. "I've been ashamed since the day you was born, boy. No, from before that day. Know what else? I was glad when your mom died. Bitch had been fucking around on me for years, banging every bastard that came through the front door. Served her right."

"I said shut up!" Peter shouted, his anger building up inside him.

"Cancer was too good for her."

"I'm gonna kill you."

"No, boy, *I'm* gonna kill *you*." Mr O'Mahoney aimed the revolver at his son. "What, you think I got this old piece out to finish myself off? You ain't as smart as you like to think! Guess your old man can still teach you a trick or two after all." He smiled and cocked the revolver.

"Pull that trigger and you'll be the corpse," Peter promised.

"All I ever wanted was your respect," his father said. "I didn't care if you loved me, I didn't care if you hated me either, I just wanted your respect, and you couldn't even give me that."

"It's difficult to respect someone who beats you up every night," Peter said. "You can only hate them, and God knows I've always hated you."

"The feeling's mutual," his father replied, finger tightening around the trigger. "Goodbye, boy." But before he could fire the gun, its

barrel began moving sideways. "What the hell?"

Peter was holding a hand out toward the revolver, controlling its movement despite being on the other side of the kitchen from his dad. "I won't let you hurt me again," he hissed.

"My wrist, you're hurting my wrist!" his father protested. The hand holding the gun was twisting in the air, curling slowly around so the barrel was aimed at him instead of his son. "I don't understand... How are you...?"

"If anyone's going to eat a bullet tonight, it's going to be you," Peter said. He pushed his hand forward through the air and the gun mimicked the action, moving closer to Mr O'Mahoney's head until the muzzle was pressing against the drunk's forehead. "Lower," Peter commanded, and the barrel slid down his dad's sweating face, past the eyes and nose, until it reached the mouth. "Open!"

Mr O'Mahoney's lips parted involuntarily.

"Now, bite down on the barrel."

Peter's father tried to protest but his words were cut short.

"I didn't say you could speak, did I? Now, bite down."

His father's teeth clamped around the barrel, forcing themselves into the metal, grinding against the revolver. Peter walked across the kitchen and crouched beside his father. "Any last words?"

Mr O'Mahoney stared at his son, disbelief in his eyes, sweat dribbling down his face. A pool of yellow appeared between his legs on the kitchen floor.

"You might not have loved Mom, but I did. I want you to think about her, lying on that hospital bed, the pain she must have gone through while she was dying. I want you to experience a fraction of the discomfort and terror she felt, waiting to die all those months." Peter straightened up again. "I should leave you here like this all night. One move, and the gun would blow your brains out the back of your head. One lapse in concentration from me and you'd be dead, a sad old jock who took the easy way out. That's what the cops would think. But I'm not doing to do that. I'm better than that. I'm better than you." Peter turned away dismissively. "Remember this; I let you live. Remember the fear you felt here today—that's how I felt every day growing up in this house. Remember all of it, you bastard."

***

Alex opened her eyes. So much for Dr Taubmann and his amazing powers of hypnosis. Don't give up the day job, she thought idly, before realizing things were all askew. It was as if the whole room had turned upside down and she was lying on the ceiling. Stranger still, she could see herself below on the couch, the psychiatrist sitting close by, her mom watching from the door. Shit, it worked! I'm having an out of body experience just like Kat did. That sent a chill through her. Alex watched, fascinated, as her physical body shivered in response on the couch. Freaky. Taubmann nodded to her mom.

"She's under. I'll begin with a few simple questions to test if it's worked." He leaned closer to the couch. "Alex, can you hear me?"

Alex was going to reply but another voice issued from her hypnotized body. "Alex isn't here, asshole." Taubmann and Joyce reacted with surprise but they weren't as shocked as Alex. She recognized the voice—it was Krueger! That bastard was using her like a radio. He must have pushed her out, taken advantage of the hypnosis to seize control of her body. Shit, there was no knowing what the sick fuck was going to say or do now.

"Doctor, what—" Joyce began, but Taubmann motioned her to silence.

"If Alex isn't there, who is?" he asked gently.

"You can call me Fred," the gravelly, sinister voice replied from Alex's lips.

"Fred?"

"Or Daddy. I like being called Daddy," Krueger hissed.

No! Alex shouted from the ceiling but nobody heard her, nobody noticed her. *No, don't listen to him! He's lying. I'm up here.*

"Where is Alex?" Taubmann asked.

"That bitch is mine now. Mom's little whore. Hey, Joyce, did you know she spent the afternoon getting balled upstairs?"

Krueger, stop this, Alex pleaded. *Don't do this to me, please.*

"She goes like a train, your little slut."

Alex watched her mom run from the room. Taubmann persisted with his questions. "What do you want?"

"Pain. Terror. Fear," Krueger snarled. "All my favorite things."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"But you must have a reason."

"Because I *enjoy* it, asshole. Just like little Alex enjoys cutting herself. Because it's a rush."

Taubmann sat back in his seat. "I'm going to end this session now, I think it's for the best. I'm going to count to three and snap my fingers. When I do, the hypnotic trance will end and Alex will wake up. One..."

"You haven't got a fucking clue, have you Doc?" Krueger taunted.

"Two..."

"You must be new in town if you haven't heard of me. Ask Sheriff Williams, he knows about me."

"Three."

"Tell him Fred Krueger sent you."

Taubmann was about to snap his fingers but stopped at hearing that name. "You're Krueger?"

"In the flesh."

From the ceiling Alex watched as one of her hands rose from the couch, grabbing Taubmann's left wrist. "What are you doing?" the psychiatrist protested. "You can't..." Alex's other hand took hold of Taubmann's pinkie and yanked it sharply backward so the little finger touched the back of his hand, the bones snapping like twigs. Taubmann screamed in agony.

Alex watched as her body laughed at the psychiatrist's pain. "You said you wanted to snap your fingers, Doc, so I was just giving you a helping hand. Catch you later, fucker!" Alex felt herself being sucked back down to her body. She sat up as her mom returned to the room, brought back by the psychiatrist's cry of pain.

Taubmann was rocking in his seat, nursing his broken finger, staring in disbelief at Alex. "What happened?" Joyce asked in a panic.

"It wasn't me," Alex tried to explain, "it was Krueger! When Taubmann hypnotized me, Krueger took over my body."

"Sweet Jesus," Joyce gasped, looking at her daughter as if she was staring at a stranger. "Dr Taubmann, are you alright?"

He shook his head, the color draining from his face. "No, it's... I've never... Your daughter, she..." He gave up trying to explain, preferring to concentrate on the pain from his ruptured finger.

"I'll call an ambulance," Joyce decided, retreating to the hallway.

Alex moved closer to Taubmann, talking to him quietly. "Please, Doc, you've got to believe me. I didn't hurt you, it was Krueger," she hissed urgently.

"Stay away from me," was his only reply.

A moment later Joyce returned. "It'll be here in a few minutes."

Taubmann stood up and approached her. "Mrs Corwin, could I have a few words with you in the kitchen?"

"Of course." Joyce moved aside to let him pass, all the while watching her daughter. "Alexandra, stay here while I look after Dr Taubmann, alright?"

Alex nodded numbly. She could feel her mom's fear like a fist of ice. Alex waited until her mom and Taubmann had gone into the kitchen before creeping into the hall, straining to hear their hushed voices.

"I don't know how to say this without sounding overly dramatic, Mrs Corwin, but I believe your daughter is... seriously disturbed. Alex is certainly delusional. She exhibits symptoms consistent with multiple personality disorder and displays severe sociopathic tendencies."

"I don't understand. How could this have happened? And why now?"

"You say she's been treated for self-harming in the past?"

"Yes, but that stopped a year ago. I watch her very carefully and there've been no obvious symptoms of it restarting until a few days ago. I found bloody sheets in her room and she started skipping class. Principal Shaye suspended her from school and now... now I don't know where she goes. Or who she is."

Alex could hear her mom gently sobbing. Taubmann didn't speak again until the tears had subsided. "I know this isn't easy to hear, Mrs Corwin, but I believe Alexandra is a danger both to herself and to others. You can see what she did to me, snapping my finger as you or I would snap the wishbone from a Thanksgiving turkey. I don't want you getting hurt like I did."

"What do you suggest?"

Here it comes, Alex thought. Rubber room for Miss Corwin.

"I've only been in Springwood a few months but I know there is an excellent care facility for disturbed teenagers at Westin Hills. It's dealt with cases like Alex, providing a safe environment where unhappy youths can get better, bit by bit."

"I don't know," Joyce whispered.

Don't do it, Alex urged.

"It's for her own good," Taubmann said.

Please, don't do it!

"I need to think about this, to sleep on it," Joyce decided eventually. The wail of an approaching siren signaled the ambulance's arrival. Alex hurried back to the couch and waited while her mom escorted the injured psychiatrist outside. Once Taubmann was gone, Joyce came nervously into the room.

"How do you feel?" she asked from the door, as if afraid to come closer.

"I'm fine," Alex said. "How's the shrink?"

"Several broken bones, ruptured tendons—his hand's a mess."

"Mom, whatever he said, you know he's wrong, don't you?"

"I... I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything anymore, " Joyce admitted.

"You know what these psychiatrists are like, always looking for the worst."

"Maybe..."

Alex stood up, shoving her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "I'm exhausted. I'm going to bed, okay?" Joyce nodded, deep in thought. Alex gave her a kiss on the way out of the room, trying not to notice how her mom flinched away from the show of affection.

***

Heather found her mom slumped over a bottle of gin in the kitchen. She debated trying to wake her but decided not to bother. God knows her mom wouldn't thank her for the effort. Instead Heather went upstairs and brushed her teeth, getting ready for bed. The tune from an old nursery rhyme jangled around inside her head. Try as she might, the words would not come, lingering beyond reach at the edge of her mind.

Heather went to her bedroom and changed into an old pair of pajamas. She always put them on when she wasn't feeling well, when colds or flu or cramps got the better of her. After brushing her long, blonde hair—one hundred strokes with the left hand, another hundred with the right—she knelt beside the bed and looked up at a crucifix fixed to the wall. It felt strange, like being a child again, kneeling down to ask God for help. But they needed all the help they could get and if the Almighty felt like joining in, so much the better.

Now all she needed was a prayer. Heather smiled as the memory of one she used to recite long ago returned. Closing her eyes, she began to whisper its words. "Now I lay me down to sleep..." Another verse entered her thoughts, the words for the nursery rhyme tune coming unbidden into her mind: *One, two, Freddy's coming for you*. "I pray the Lord my soul to keep..." *Three, four, better lock your door*. "If I should die before I wake..." *Five, six, grab a crucifix*. "I pray the Lord my soul to take." *Seven, eight, gonna stay up late*. Heather shuddered and reached for the bottle of Hypnocil by her bed, popped two pills into her mouth, and dry swallowed them both. *Nine, ten, never sleep again*. She knelt on the bed and took the crucifix from its mounting on the wall. Clutching the cross to her chest, she got beneath the covers and closed her eyes. Let me have one night of sleep without nightmares, she prayed silently. Just one.

***

It was late when Sheriff Williams arrived at Springwood General's emergency room. He'd been on his way home when the call came

through. Some shrink called Taubmann was at the hospital and wanted to talk about an FK scenario. Dispatch knew better than to broadcast Krueger's name out loud, especially to the sheriff. Hell, it was Williams who had forbidden anyone from saying that bastard's name in the station house.

The sheriff arrived as Taubmann was leaving, the psychiatrist's left hand encased in plaster. "Been in the wars, Doc?"

"This was done by a teenage girl in a state of hypnosis. She started speaking in a man's voice, making all sorts of threats and abusive comments. Then she nearly tore my little finger off."

"You want to lodge a complaint against her?"

"No," Taubmann said wearily. "This girl, she claimed she was being possessed by the spirit of a man called Fred Kru—"

"Don't say that name," Williams warned, his genial manner gone in a moment. "Don't even think it."

The psychiatrist nodded. "When I first arrived in Springwood, I was taken on a tour of Westin Hills. One of the doctors there explained a little of the history of such cases to me, how the teenagers of this town have been affected."

"What was this girl's name? Corwin? Alex Corwin?"

"Yes. How did you—"

"That doesn't matter," the sheriff said, sighing heavily. "Where is she?"

"Still at home with her mother. I advised Mrs Corwin that Alex should be committed to Westin Hills, but she wants time to think it over."

"I should have acted sooner," Williams muttered. "No way of knowing how far it's spread already."

"Spread? You talk about this case as if it's an epidemic. I believe Alex Corwin is suffering from mental illness, sheriff. That isn't infectious."

"No, but hysteria is. Could we have this Corwin girl forcibly committed for reasons of public safety?"

Taubmann shook his head. "Not without her mother's permission. This is America, sheriff, not a police state. She isn't a terrorist."

"That's exactly what she is." Williams waved away Taubmann's objections. "I'm not saying she hijacks planes or blows up buildings. But Alex Corwin is spreading fear through this town, creating terror, even if she doesn't realize it yet. We've got to find a way to contain her, stop this going any further."

"How?"

The sheriff activated his radio. "This is Williams. I want round the clock surveillance on 1428 Elm Street, starting immediately. I don't care who you have to pull in from off duty, do it. If a teenage girl tries to leave the house, she must be stopped. They can tell her she's under house arrest. Hell, they can tell her whatever they like, but she must not be let out of that place. Got it?" Satisfied with the response he got, Williams turned back to Taubmann. "You need a lift?"

The psychiatrist nodded. "I guess I do. My car's still parked on Elm Street."

"I'll drive. You tell me everything you know about Alex Corwin."

SIXTEEN

You find the doorway, not where you expected it to be, but you find it. One step and you're through into the sickly yellow light, clouds of steam billowing up from the boiler room below. A voice of rusted steel and pain laughs at your fear, beckoning you closer, luring you down the spiral staircase. You smell rust and decay and terror, bitter in your mouth, choking your breath, suffocating. Fat drops of warm water spatter your skin from above, falling from an invisible ceiling. Chains chink and clink in the air as you pass them, descending still, lower and lower, until at last you reach the bottom.

"What do you want?" the monster breathes from behind you.

I don't want to die, *you admit.*

"Kill or be killed; you know the drill," he hisses.

But I don't want to hurt anyone, not anymore.

"That didn't stop you before, fucker!"

I'll do it, you say. I'll do what you want.

Krueger laughs at you. "And?"

I'll be your disciple if you spare me.

"Why should I?"

I'll be whatever you want, just... don't hurt me.

"You'll be my good right hand among the waking? You'll kill and maim and torture, all to save your sorry skin?" He laughs at your cowardice.

You're ashamed, hating yourself, despairing, but still you nod.

Krueger comes closer, his breath on your neck, his fingerknives sliding across your skin. "Very well. Prove yourself. Kill for me and I'll let you live.

Who should I kill? *you ask, not daring to look your master in the eye.*

"You already know..." Krueger laughs and you stumble away, terror and excitement fighting for control of your heart, your breath coming in short gasps, the fear and the thrill of what you're going to do already coursing through your veins. You will kill for your master... and you will enjoy it.

***

Alex opened her eyes, still gasping for breath. That wasn't me, she told herself, over and over. That wasn't me, I didn't make a deal with Krueger, did I? No, I couldn't, I wouldn't. Alex sat up in bed, drawing her knees closer, hugging them to her chest. I have to believe that wasn't me with Krueger. But if it wasn't her, who was it? Peter, Heather or Chris? One of them had gone to Krueger, joined with him, allied themselves to the monster. One of them had betrayed her and the others to save their own skin, but which one? Alex knew how frightened Peter was of Krueger, but that fear counted against him. She couldn't imagine Peter having the courage to face Krueger alone, couldn't believe he would betray her. That left Heather and Chris.

Surely Heather wouldn't align herself with that bastard? Alex thought long and hard before having to admit she didn't know Heather well enough to have an answer for that question. That left Chris. He was angry enough to embrace what Krueger was offering. The look in his eyes when he'd hit her at Heather's place... Chris scared the shit out of Alex. There was a reckless fury inside him, a burning rage waiting for the chance to escape. She could imagine Chris killing for Krueger and enjoying the experience, enjoying the power of taking somebody else's life. It could be Chris.

Or it could be me, Alex admitted. Watching from the ceiling as her physical self attacked that shrink, the brutal way she'd snapped his finger backward, it was chilling. Yes, Krueger had been controlling her body; at least, that was how it had seemed at the time. How do I know that wasn't me, pretending to be Krueger? How do I know all of this isn't some kind of displacement mental activity, a massive self-delusion? How can I be sure that I'm not creating the Krueger persona to excuse myself from taking responsibility for my own actions? How do I know that wasn't me in the vision, making a deal with the devil? Alex looked at the cuts on her arm that appeared when she'd first been sliced by Krueger's blades in one of her nightmares. How do I know I didn't do that myself, like my mom thinks?

The truth was Alex didn't know, she couldn't know. Maybe Taubmann was right, maybe she was suffering from whatever shit he'd been saying to her mom. Maybe she was wigging out big time. Let's face it, Alex told herself, I'd be the last one to know. She smiled. Sitting in bed and holding a conversation in my head probably wasn't a good sign, she decided. "Fuck this shit," she announced to the empty bedroom and got up, yawning.

Rain battered the window, trying to get inside. Alex wandered over to the glass and peered out into the downpour. Why did it always rain for funerals? She remembered standing under an umbrella when the last of her grandparents was buried, years ago. The mud had squelched over the sides of her shiny new shoes, bought specially for the occasion. Her mom had scolded her afterward and then burst into tears. Yeah, funerals were always guaranteed to be a laugh riot. Kat's would be no different.

Movement on the street caught her eye. A police car stopped across the road from the house, taking position behind another patrol vehicle. The two drivers got out and talked to each other in the rain, both glancing across at Alex's home several times. Eventually one car left, but the new arrival remained, its driver keeping watch over Elm Street. No, not Elm Street, Alex realized. He's watching our house, my house. What the hell was going on?

The phone rang, taking her away from the window. "Hey, Alex. It's Heather. Yesterday afternoon, did you...?"

"The boiler room with Krueger?"

"Yeah."

"I was there too, so was Peter. We all were. We all saw the same thing."

"That's what I was afraid of," Heather said. "How is Krueger able to bring us together in one nightmare like that?"

"I don't know. Peter and I were both dosed with Hypnocil at the time, but it didn't do us any good." Alex remembered the cop car outside. "Heather, have you got police watching your house from the road?"

"No, at least, not that I've noticed. I'll go check."

Alex waited while Heather went to see. She almost hoped they were all being watched; that would be less frightening. Heather returned to the phone. "No, nobody outside. Why? Have you?"

"Yeah." Alex explained what had happened with Doctor Taubmann. "Guess I'm under surveillance or something."

"Well, find a way to sneak out," Heather replied. "Chris thinks the four of us should meet, talk about what Krueger said. If one of us gives in to that monster, we'll all end up dead, or worse."

Alex thought about what she'd seen in her vision. It might already be too late. Still, it was worth a try. "Where and when?"

"The graveyard, after one. It'll give us a chance to say goodbye to Kat. I've already talked to Peter about it and he said he'd be there." Alex could hear knocking on a door at Heather's house. "Mom, can you get that? I'm on the phone. Mom?" Silence followed but no response came, except more knocking. "I've gotta go," Heather told Alex. "Someone's at the front door and my mom must have already staggered off to work, nursing one of her killer hangovers."

"I'll see you at one," Alex promised and hung up. That's if I can find a way past my shadow outside, she realized.

***

Heather hurried downstairs and opened the front door. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

"Can I come in?" the new arrival asked.

Heather let him enter and then closed the door after double-checking there were no police cars watching the house. God, being around Alex is making me paranoid, Heather decided. She looked at her visitor. "So, why the surprise visit?"

***

The rain finally let up about midday, much to the relief of Officer Goodman. He'd been sitting outside 1428 Elm Street all morning, dreading that girl trying to leave the house. Chasing teenagers down the sidewalk in the rain was not his idea of fun. Hell, why did they even have to keep watch on this place? He had a stack of yellowing

paperwork on his desk at the station that he was planning to tackle today, until landing this ass-numbing assignment. The older cops spent most days bitching about their hemorrhoids. I'll be an expert myself if something doesn't happen here soon, Goodman decided.

"Dispatch to Goodman, come in."

"This is Goodman. What it is Lois?"

"Got an emergency call, can you respond?"

"You know I'm watching the Corwin girl's house. Give it to someone else."

"This call is *from* the girl's house, Goodman. She says there's an intruder coming in through a basement window at the back. Can you see anything?"

"Shit." He twisted around in his seat, but nothing was obvious. "No, I'll have to go check it out. Better send another car here. Goodman out." The police officer eased himself out of the driver's seat, adjusting his holster, cuffs and night stick to more comfortable positions on his belt, and began jogging across the road to the house. Looking back on it later, Goodman realized he should have waited for backup to arrive before investigating. But an emergency was an emergency, even if the person under attack was also under surveillance, right? Wrong. Not when it's a diversion. At least, that's what Sheriff Williams shouted at him later.

***

Peter and Chris were already at the graveyard gates when Alex arrived. She hadn't been sure what to wear—it was a funeral, after all—but eventually opted for black jeans and a dark top. The others were also somberly dressed, out of respect for Kat. "The hearse and family car went in about half an hour ago," Peter told Alex. "They should be coming out again any minute."

"This is probably them," Chris said, ushering the others away from the gates. Once the hearse and cortege had passed, the three teenagers walked into the cemetery. It was a vast field of grass and stone, crosses and headstones evenly spaced on the undulating green, the last resting place of Springwood residents stretching into

the distance. Tree-lined avenues divided the gardens of the dead, while more elaborate crypts stood atop grassy knolls.

The air was heavy and humid, wisps of steam gently rising from puddles evaporating in the afternoon sun. Alex could smell the crisp, tangy scent of freshly cut lawn. Imagine having the job of keeping everything neat, coming to work each day in a field of memorials and weeping relatives. When I go, it's crematorium time for me: dead girl, lightly toasted. Better that than slowly rotting into worm food, a box full of maggots as your last repose.

Chris paused to talk with one of the ground staff who pointed along a row to their right before moving on. "He says today's burials are all in the eastern section. They'll still be filling in Kat's grave so it should be obvious."

"Shouldn't we wait for Heather?" Alex asked.

Chris shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so."

The three of them sat down on the curb, watching the cemetery staff going about their jobs, tending to the graves and flowerbeds and trees After a minute Peter cleared his throat, the silence seemingly too much for him. "I never used to think about dying, you know? Before last week, I liked to kid myself I was immortal and that dying was something that happened to old people. But now..."

"You think about it all the time," Chris said.

Peter nodded. "Don't you?"

"Krueger ain't gonna get the better of me," Chris vowed. "He's just another bully, like Johnston."

"Tell that to Kat," Alex said flatly. "Or Lloyd. See if they agree with you."

"I'm saying what I think, okay?" Chris snapped. "You got a problem with me expressing my opinion? This is a free country, isn't it?"

"Long as you don't fall asleep," she observed. "Once you start dreaming, you're in Krueger's domain. Even the bravest person could give in to him."

Chris stood up, looming over her. "What are you accusing me of?"

"Nothing. Just making sure we're all still on the same side."

He pointed a finger accusingly at Alex. "I don't need a lecture from you, I get enough of that shit at home!"

She arched an eyebrow at him. "How is your dad?"

"Fuck you!"

Peter hurriedly got between the two of them. "Hey, everybody calm down, okay? We're here for Kat."

Chris turned away in disgust, checking his watch. "It's long gone one. I say we find Kat's grave and get this over with. Heather can catch up with us."

"Now you're making sense," Alex agreed, leading the way east through the gardens of stone. Peter and Chris followed her, Chris still muttering under his breath. Alex could feel waves of anger and hatred surging from him, violence bubbling below the surface. It was a murderous rage, but did that make him a murderer, someone willing to kill to save themselves?

It took five minutes to reach Kat's grave. As they approached, two gravediggers were rolling up a green carpet from around the edges of the freshly filled grave. They confirmed Kat was buried there. "Walker, K. Yeah, this is her. But you missed the service; it was an hour ago," the senior worker said before leaving with his colleague. "Sorry."

There was no headstone at the grave yet, of course. But Alex could feel Kat's presence, mournfully lingering in the air. She knelt beside the grave and rested her hands in the dirt, digging her fingers into the soil.

"I wonder what Kat would say if she was here?" Peter murmured.

"'I'm dying for a cigarette,' or something like that," Alex suggested with a smile.

Chris crouched beside her. "You can sometimes sense what people are feeling, right? Can you do the same with...?"

"Dead people?"

Chris nodded.

"I don't know," Alex said. "But I'll try." She closed her eyes and reached deeper into the soil, exploring, searching for emotions amidst the dirt. "No, there's nothing here anymore, it's..." Her voice trailed away, her face scrunching with concentration. "I've got her.

She's in pain, terrible pain. Krueger still has her. He's hurting her, toying with her."

"What else?" Chris asked

"I don't..."

"What else?" he demanded, anger creeping into his voice again.

"Suffering, that's all I can feel. Kat's suffering." Alex opened her eyes, tears falling from them on to the dirt. "She'll never rest in peace while Krueger has her in his power." She looked at Chris then across to Peter standing nearby. "None of us will."

"So what can we do?" Peter asked, hopelessly.

"Fight him," Chris replied. "We can't hope to beat him individually, but if we work together maybe we can. Maybe we will."

"Shouldn't we go to the cops for help?" Peter persisted.

"And tell them what?" Alex said. "They already know about Krueger and they've done nothing to stop him, or to help us. Jesus, they've virtually put me under house arrest! You think asking them nicely will make any difference?"

"What about our parents?"

"Mom's already decided I'm losing it, Peter. The only question is how long before she sends me to Westin Hills." Alex stood up, moving closer to him. "Maybe we should ask your old man for help. Do you honestly think he'd come rushing to our aid?"

Peter shook his head.

"My family's scared to be near me," Chris admitted. "They think I'm gonna burn them, like I burnt my dad's hands."

So that's where his anger was coming from, Alex realized, at least some of it. She could also recognize shame among Chris's storm of emotions, buried deep inside the rage, fuelling it, driving it.

"Heather's mom would rather drown herself in gin than face reality," Chris added, "let alone face what we're up against."

Peter shook his head sadly. "So we're on our own."

"We have each other," Chris maintained. "Four of us against Krueger. That's gotta be fighting odds at least, right?"

I hope you're right, Alex thought, but kept her doubts to herself. "If we want to beat this bastard, we'll have to do it ourselves."

"But how?" Peter was close to tears, his eyes dwelling on Kat's grave.

Chris folded his arms. "The fucker gave us these abilities. Maybe we can use them against him."

Alex shook her head. "He'd have thought of that, wouldn't he?"

"Maybe, maybe not. He figured we'd cave in straight away, but we haven't," Chris replied. "I say we fight back. It's better than waiting for him to take us out one by one. Better to die fighting than on our knees."

"You're right," she admitted. "It's gotta be worth a try."

"Peter?" Chris asked.

The other youth took off his glasses and wiped the moisture from his eyes. "Alright. I'm in too."

"That just leaves Heather," Alex said.

Chris looked back to the graveyard's gates but Heather was still not in view. "She should have been here by now. I haven't seen her at all today. Which of you two talked to her last?"

"Me, I think," Alex offered. "She called this morning, said she'd already talked to Peter about meeting here."

"You don't think she's..." Peter's voice trailed off. "That he's..."

Chris shook his head. "No way. I'd know, I'm sure of it."

"I thought I would too," Alex added, "but we can't be sure. If Krueger has found a way to overcome the Hypnocil, who knows what else he can do?"

"Oh shit," Chris whispered. "Heather..."

The three of them started running.

***

Tammy Sutherland staggered in through the kitchen door, gin bottles clinking against each other. She dropped her keys on the breakfast counter, dumped the bag beside them and swiftly removed the lid from her fresh supply of liquor. "Hey, Heather, I'm home, honey!" Tammy called out, before pouring a more than generous slug of gin down her throat. "I wasn't feeling too good so I took the rest of the afternoon off. Thought maybe we'd pamper each other since you

haven't got any school this week." Another tip of the bottle, another grateful swallow. "Heather? You home, darling?"

A steady dripping sound got Tammy's gin-sodden attention, making her stop and listen. The sound wasn't coming from inside the kitchen, the dripping was out in the hall. Tammy lurched over to the door and peered through it. Yeah, there was something dripping in the hall. It had made a puddle close to the stairs, a red puddle. Tammy moved closer, keeping one hand on the nearest wall for support. If there was a puddle on the floor, then the dripping must be coming from above the puddle, right? She looked up and frowned. Why was there a big red stain on the ceiling? As she got nearer, one of the drips fell from the edge of the stain on to her face. It trickled down her skin and into her mouth, spreading across her tongue in a moment, warm and wet, tasting of iron and—

Tammy couldn't explain why she went up the stairs to the landing. She knew what must be there. To have made such a stain on the ceiling, pint after pint of the crimson liquid must have been spilled, enough to soak through the carpet and floor boards and on through the ceiling panels. Despite knowing all that, she had to see what was on the landing, some awful compulsion drawing her up the stairs, daring her to see what was waiting there.

So she went, and she saw.

And she screamed.

***

Alex, Peter and Chris arrived at Heather's house to find her mom collapsed on the front steps, her hands covered in blood, her mouth moving soundlessly. Chris ran inside, crying in anguish at what he found in the hallway. Alex heard him sprint up the stairs, then another cry, this time much longer, a howl of pure rage and misery, like some wounded animal. She and Peter exchanged a look, already suspecting what Chris had found.

"Call the police," Alex urged Peter. "You better ask for an ambulance too."

"I don't think Heather will need it," he said sadly.

"For her mom," Alex said before going inside. The hallway was awash with blood, at least two sets of shoe prints visible in the crimson-soaked carpet. She steeled herself and started up the stairs. A trail of smeared blood was visible on the wall, probably from Heather's mom. Chris had collapsed on the landing, his eyes staring glassily at what was left of Heather. Alex turned to follow his gaze and gasped, a stream of bile rising from her gut. She ran into the bathroom and puked all over the floor, retching again and again. Only when she was sure her stomach was empty did Alex dare come back out.

Heather's corpse was naked, not just of clothes, but also of skin. Every square inch had been flailed from her body, the fragments of ripped skin stuck to the walls, the floor, even to the ceiling in places. What was left of Heather glistened wetly, surrounded by a pool of congealing blood. Her torso had been gutted, organs savagely cut out and ripped apart before being thrown aside, discarded like so much confetti. Above her body, a message was smeared on the wall in red: 3 DOWN, 3 TO GO. Alex knew for certain that Krueger's disciple had done this. It was the price of acceptance set by that monster: a life for a life, and Heather was the victim.

Peter came up the stairs, careful not to step in the bloody footprints of those who had been there before him. "Is she...?"

"Yes," Alex said.

"I've called the police and an ambulance. They'll be here soon. We should go if we don't want to spend another night at the station." Peter made sure not to look at the source of all the blood, keeping his gaze fixed on Alex. He pointed at Chris. "Is he alright?"

"Shock, I guess. He hasn't said anything yet." Alex knelt beside Chris, gently shaking his shoulder. "We've got to go now. There's nothing more we can do here. Heather's gone."

He blinked and saw her, perhaps for the first time since Alex came up the stairs. "We can't leave her like that," Chris said.

"We have to. The police are going to be swarming all over this place in a few minutes. We have to get out of here."

"Alex is right," Peter added. "There's nothing more we can do for Heather."

Chris blinked again, noticing Peter. "Yes, there is. We can kill Krueger. We can make sure she rests in peace, away from that sick fuck."

"You're welcome to try," another voice interjected, "but I doubt you little shits have got the balls for the job." Alex felt cold shivers of fear running through her body: not just her own fear, but that of Chris and Peter too. The voice belonged to Krueger, of course. Alex twisted round to face him, but it wasn't Krueger smiling at her from the other side of the landing. It was Heather's skinned and gutted remains, her torso folding forward at the waist in a macabre mockery of someone sitting upright.

"Fuck," Alex whispered. "Can't you leave her alone, you bastard? She's dead, let her be."

What was left of Heather stood up, more of her insides spilling out on the floor as the reanimated corpse got to its feet. Her dead face split into a ghoulish smile, the eyeballs dancing inside their sockets. Heather's skinless head tilted forward and looked at the rest of her body. Krueger's laughter taunted the three teenagers. "Guess beauty is only skin deep after all, huh?"

Chris was up on his feet, fists clenched, spoiling for a fight. "What do you want from us, you bastard? What?"

"Kill for me, spread my name, feed me with terror. Make me strong!" Heather's corpse folded its arms. "Or weren't you paying attention?"

"We won't do it," Chris snarled back. "We won't be your puppets."

"Are you sure about that? I'll make it worth your while." The bloody body began touching itself, stroking and caressing what was left of its torso, mimicking the movements of someone making love. "Oh, Chris, you're so strong and powerful. Hold me, Chris, hold me closer."

"Fuck you!" Chris screamed, the veins on his neck bulging. Only Alex and Peter holding him back prevented Chris attacking Heather's corpse.

"I think you already did that, big boy." Krueger laughed at Chris, laughed at all of them. Alex could hear sirens approaching. "Nearly time for me to go," Krueger announced. Heather's corpse pointed at

itself. "This bitch is with me now. Who's next? If anyone would like to die, please put your hands up."

Tires screeched to a halt outside the house. Alex could hear car doors opening and then slamming shut again and men shouting to each other in the street. The cops had arrived. No doubt Heather's bloodstained mom on the front steps was giving them a moment of pause. I can almost hear the safeties on their guns being flicked off, Alex thought. She tugged on Chris's arm.

"We've got to go, we've to get away from here," she urged.

"Kill you later, dudes," Krueger's rasping voice announced, then he was gone. Heather's corpse collapsed on to the banisters of the stairwell before tumbling over and smashing down on the bloody steps below, bones snapping and breaking in a wet jumble of noise.

Peter looked past Heather's remains to the front door. "The cops are right outside. We can't risk going down the stairs."

Alex glanced around the doorways leading off the landing. "Chris, you know this place better than us. Is there another way out of here from upstairs?"

"Heather's bedroom is at the back of the house," he replied numbly, still staring at the pool of blood where his girlfriend had died. "There's an old trellis running down the wall beneath her window. Her dad used to grow prize-winning roses."

Alex and Peter bundled Chris into Heather's bedroom. Peter opened the window and leaned out. "It looks safe for the moment." He climbed through the gap and down the frame, followed by Chris and Alex. They could hear the police moving through the house, each new discovery punctuated by blasphemy and retching.

Once the three were on the ground they ran to the back fence. Alex was last to climb the high wooden wall, pausing to look back at the house. Officer Goodman was at the back door, shouting and pointing at them, reaching for his service pistol. Alex hit the ground running on the other side of the fence.

***

Joyce had spent the morning trying to work and failing, her head full of worries about Alex. Doctor Taubmann was well regarded in his field, but she still couldn't bring herself to believe his diagnosis. I know my daughter, Joyce thought. She has had her problems, but she was getting better. I can't accept she's gotten so ill so fast. It doesn't make sense.

After sifting listlessly through her salad at lunch, Joyce asked for the afternoon off. I'll go home and see how Alex is doing, she thought to herself. Maybe talk some sense into her, or at least see for myself whether Taubmann is right. I can't give up on her, not yet. Alex is all I've got left. It had taken Joyce another hour to clear her desk so she could leave early in good conscience. Driving back to Elm Street, a growing sense of dread gnawed at her empty stomach, churning inside her. Something bad was happening; she could feel it.

Joyce turned into Elm Street and braked. The road was closed off, and a half a dozen police cars blocked her way while men in uniform sealed the street with black and yellow striped tape. Already a morbidly curious crowd had gathered and was straining against the temporary barrier, trying to get a better look at what was going on. Joyce relaxed slightly when she realized it wasn't her house where all the police activity was focused. But there was no easy way of getting past the police, so she parked and walked over for a closer look.

A woman about her age was being treated in the back of an ambulance, hands covered in blood, her face a blank mask, eyes staring sightlessly into the distance. Bloody handprints were visible on the front door of the house through which cops and county officials were bustling back and forth. Another police car nosed its way through the throng of rubberneckers trying to get closer to the scene. Eventually it gave up and stopped, a man in his fifties with a sheriff's badge emerging from the vehicle.

Joyce recognized one of the cops maintaining the police cordon. It was Officer Goodman, who had interviewed Alex a few days earlier. Maybe he could tell her what was going on. She waved at him but he seemed unhappy to see her there and ignored the gesture. Instead he approached the sheriff and the two men consulted in low voices, occasionally glancing across at Joyce. She'd seen those troubled

looks before. She'd been right. Something was wrong here, and somehow Alex was involved. Oh God, maybe Dr Taubmann was right. Maybe I should have let him take Alex to Westin Hills last night. Please don't let my baby be dead, Joyce prayed.

SEVENTEEN

Williams had seen some horror shows in his time—you didn't get to be sheriff in a place like Springwood, with all its troubles, without witnessing the worst that humanity could do—but the bloodbath inside the Sutherland house beggared belief. What kind of animal could commit such an atrocity? To skin a teenage girl's corpse was bad enough, but to have done it while she was still alive? Williams wouldn't have thought that possible if the coroner hadn't suggested it after he finished throwing up in the bathroom. Then there was the gutting of the body before it was tossed down the stairs, like a dirty pillowcase, empty and unwanted. What the fuck was this town coming to?

Williams didn't want to believe Krueger was back, but shit like this was making that hard to maintain. Hell, America had seen teenage rampages turn high schools into slaughterhouses, but that was with guns. Even freaks like Bundy and Manson would blink twice before turning the prom queen into so much chopped meat. No, whatever was behind this, it was a sickness beyond anything even Springwood had witnessed before. The sheriff turned away, unable to take it in. Something worse than Krueger, that didn't bear thinking about. His mind was made up. Whatever else happened, he would see this grisly business through to its conclusion and then he would resign and take early retirement. He'd be lucky if he didn't end up eating a bullet within a year as a way of getting this nightmare out of his thoughts.

After seeing all he ever wanted to and plenty more inside the house, the sheriff staggered back outside, hungry for clean air. He had asked Goodman to take the Corwin girl's mother to one side for questioning. Goodman had seen Alex and two other kids fleeing the house immediately after police entered the property. Williams found it hard to believe teenagers could have committed this heinous crime, but Taubmann's description of Alex's psyche from the previous night was still ringing in his ears: delusional, sociopathic, multiple personality disorder, a danger to others as well as herself. None of that would be admissible in court, thanks to doctor/patient

confidentiality, but it was vital for knowing what they were dealing with. Alex Corwin was a menace and she had to be stopped.

Maybe she had formed some sort of death pact with the other kids at that drug trial? Hell, maybe these psychotic episodes were happening as a result of a side effect of the serum they were given? He'd read about cases where kids who took PCP tried to eat each other like they were cannibals. Maybe the serum had a similar effect? I don't know the answers, the sheriff thought bleakly, but I do know this: two teenagers are dead and Alex Corwin was seen near both bodies in suspicious circumstances. Maybe she was right, maybe Krueger was back, terrorizing Springwood once more. Or maybe it was Alex herself causing these deaths. Whichever was true, they had to find her and lock her away. Sorting out the consequences of what had happened in the last few days could wait for later. Stopping the killings, that was all that mattered now.

Having made up his mind, he strode over to Mrs Corwin. "Excuse me, ma'am, I'm Sheriff Williams. Have you seen your daughter at all today?"

"Yes, of course. I left her at home this morning when I went to work. I was driving home to check on her when I saw all the police cars outside this house and stopped to see what had happened."

"A murder," Williams replied, not wanting to elaborate. "One of your daughter's classmates is dead."

"Oh my God," Mrs Corwin whispered. "Do you know who's responsible?"

"We're still investigating. The reason I asked about your daughter is that she was seen fleeing the scene as my men arrived."

"Alex? But that's impossible, she's at home."

"Not any more," the sheriff was forced to admit. "I've had men watching your house but Alex snuck out shortly after noon today."

"Hold on a second. You've had men watching my house? Why?"

Oh boy, Williams thought. Now the shit really hits the fan. He recounted what Taubmann had told him, the other incidents involving Alex and vaguely hinted at his own suspicions about Mrs Corwin's daughter. She did not take it well.

"Dr Taubmann should not have shared that information with you, sheriff. It's a clear breach of my daughter's civil rights, especially as Alex is still a minor. Anything Taubmann said is illegally obtained information. My lawyer will hear about this."

"What about the dead girl in that house?" Williams spat back at her. "What about her rights? She's been flayed alive, gutted and thrown down a staircase, and you're daughter was spotted fleeing the scene. How am I supposed to interpret that scenario? Perhaps your lawyer can help me with that too."

"This is ridiculous. I know my daughter. Alexandra may be a little unstable, a little on edge, but she is not a murderer. You've met her. You can't honestly believe she would kill her classmates, can you?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore," he said quietly. "But I've got two suspicious deaths and your daughter has links with both of them. We need to find Alex. If she's a danger to others, then she needs treatment. For all we know, she could be in danger too. If that's the case, we need to protect her. Either way, we have to find her and find her now." Williams could see Mrs Corwin was struggling to cope with all of this. He placed a comforting hand on her arm. "I know Taubmann should not have told me what he did, but that can't be undone now. The most important thing is finding Alex before somebody else gets hurt, including her. Now, do you have any idea where your daughter might be?"

"I don't know," she sobbed, losing control of her emotions.

"Think. Where has Alex been going lately? Has she made any new friends?"

Mrs Corwin pushed the tears from her eyes, smearing mascara across her cheeks. "Peter. She's been hanging around with a boy called Peter O'Mahoney. He lives further along Elm Street. And Principal Shaye mentioned another student too: Christopher something. Harris, I think Christopher Harris."

"What about places she hangs out? Anywhere Alex told you she was going, particularly in the last few days?"

Mrs Corwin sniffed, trying to pull herself together. "The hospital. She went to Springwood General to visit a friend. I remember Alex

mentioning that to me, I'm sure of it." She looked hopefully at the sheriff. "Does that help at all?"

He smiled at her encouragingly. "Yes, that's a big help, Mrs Corwin. I'll get my men looking for Alex immediately with the information you've given us. Now I suggest you go home and wait. I'll have a female officer sent round to keep you company. It's best you aren't alone at a time like this."

The sheriff watched as she stumbled away. Once Mrs Corwin was out of earshot, he activated his radio. "Lois, I need you to find home addresses for two students at Springwood High: Peter O'Mahoney and Christopher Harris. At least one of them lives on Elm Street. Send a car over to the hospital, have it look for Alex Corwin. Goodman should be able to supply a description of what the girl is wearing. And have a female officer go to 1428 Elm Street to keep Mrs Corwin company. You got all of that?"

***

"Stop!" Alex was out of breath. Her side was hurting like hell and running in combat boots was murder. She slowed down and then stopped completely, unable and unwilling to go any further for the moment. Ahead of her, Chris and Peter paused to look back. "We can't keep running away," she gasped. "The police will find us sooner or later."

"She's right," Peter told Chris.

"But what about Heather?" he protested.

"She's dead," Alex said sadly, slowly getting her breath back. "There's nothing we can do to bring her back."

"And you're going to accept that?"

"It's a fact, Chris. Unless you're planning on resurrecting her, the dead stay dead. That's it. Game over."

"What about Krueger?" he demanded. "That bastard died two generations ago and he's still haunting us. He's killing us."

"I know," Alex agreed. "What do you think we should do?"

"We could fight him," Peter suggested. The others looked at him. "If we don't want to kill each other or get killed, we have to beat him

somehow."

"With what?" Chris sneered.

"You said it yourself. We've got these abilities. We should use them against Krueger, give him a taste of his own medicine." Peter's eyes lit up at the idea. "We could go into training, learn how to turn our talents into weapons against him."

Chris shook his head. "We haven't got time for that. Besides, we're not the fucking X-Men. What next, uniforms and shit?"

Peter's face fell. "It was only an idea."

"You're both right," Alex decided. "We've got to try to fight Krueger, but we haven't got time to prepare. We need to figure out a way to beat him." A police siren wailed in the distance, cutting through their words. Alex looked around guiltily. "We need to hide someplace the cops won't find us."

Peter smiled. "The hospital's Zen garden. Nobody goes there except you, Alex."

"Good enough," she agreed. "Chris?"

"Let's go." Chris was already off and running, Peter following his lead. Alex took a deep breath and went after them.

***

It was Goodman who smelled it first: a hungry scent that gnawed at your stomach, making your mouth water involuntarily. In his opinion there was nothing better than the smell of roasting meat. As a boy he'd dutifully gone to church every Sunday, putting up with the stiff-collared shirt and ugly plaid tie, knowing what was waiting ahead: a roast lunch at his grandma's house with all the trimmings. Often times she'd cook a side of beef and one of pork too, keeping aside some crackling for her favorite grandson. The roasted potatoes would be heaped on his plate like a mountain, along with butter beans and zucchini and enough gravy to drown it all. God, thinking about it was making him hungry. But his grandma was dead and gone, along with her Sunday lunches. Probably just as well, otherwise he'd be over two hundred pounds. The smell of roasted meat seeped from the front door of the Harris house. It was a modest

property compared to most of the homes along Elm Street, but neatly kept all the same. With everyone still at the Sutherland place, Goodman had been ordered to visit both the Harris and O'Mahoney homes as part of the search for Alex and her friends. The Harris place was closer, so it came first.

Goodman pressed the doorbell again, having gotten no response the first time. He was all too aware of Officer Malone beside him, waiting impatiently and examining the chipped varnish on her nails. They had been partnered after the fiasco at that damn girl's house earlier in the day. "If you can't be trusted to use your brains, I'll have to put someone in the car with you who's got some," the sheriff had shouted. Goodman didn't mind. Malone was kinda cute, if a little dumpy. I wonder if she's seeing anyone?

"What's that smell?" Malone asked, sniffing the air.

"Roasting meat."

"Who roasts meat on a Tuesday afternoon?" she wondered

"Good point," Goodman conceded. After still getting no response from the doorbell, he peered through the windows into the hallway. There was a shape lying on the carpet, tendrils of smoke drifting lazily upward from it. No, not a shape, but a person. "Oh shit," Goodman whispered. "I think I see a body inside."

"Terrific." Malone drew her weapon and stepped away from the door. "Get back, I'm going to kick it." she announced. The door splintered inward at the first impact of her police issue boots. Another kick and it swung aside. Smoke billowed out, briefly clouding the hallway from view. When it cleared, both officers could see what was on the floor. Gideon Harris was reaching toward them, hands stretched out in supplication, lips pulled back from his teeth as if screaming. But he was obviously dead, apparently burnt alive where he lay.

"Oh God," Goodman gulped. "That wasn't roasting meat we smelled."

Malone grimaced. "It was roasting flesh. Human flesh."

Goodman was too busy barfing on the lawn to agree with her.

***

It was nearly four when Alex, Chris and Peter reached the Zen garden. Chris sank on to the stone bench and put his head in his hands, his shoulders gently shaking. Peter watched from one side, exchanging glances with Alex. She was moving around the garden, thinking out loud. "Krueger is only supposed to attack us in our dreams, we know that much for certain. But all of us who took the serum are now linked. If one of us is dreaming, all of us are vulnerable."

"So we took the Hypnocil to stop ourselves from dreaming. That should have kept us safe," Peter replied. "But it didn't."

"Right. The question is, why not? Either the serum counteracts the effects of Hypnocil, or something else does. If we could figure that out, we'd be safe from Krueger for a while." She stopped moving from stone to stone, suppressing a yawn. "I'm so tired, I can hardly think."

"We all are," Chris murmured. "Krueger keeps attacking us when we sleep, wearing us down, not giving us a chance to think."

"And each time he does, our fear grows and he gets stronger," Peter said.

"What happens when Krueger gets strong enough to escape our dreams?" Alex wondered. "How will anyone be safe from him then?"

"Like I said," Chris replied. "We've got to stop him while we still can."

"Hang on," Alex interjected. "We were all awake when Krueger possessed Heather's body, right? None of us were dreaming then." The two boys looked at each other and nodded. "Heather was already dead. So was Kat. None of us were dreaming. So how was Krueger able to manifest himself outside our dreams? How is that possible?"

"It shouldn't be," Peter agreed. "All five of us are accounted for."

"But there were six of us injected with the serum," Chris realized.

"Exactly," Alex said.

"Lloyd?" Peter shook his head. "But he's in a coma."

"That doesn't mean he's stopped dreaming," Alex said, "probably the reverse. Every time Lloyd begins dreaming, each of us is

vulnerable to Krueger. It doesn't matter if we're awake or asleep, dreaming or not."

Chris stood up. "That bastard is using Lloyd like a battery, feeding off the power of his nightmares. For all we know it's Krueger keeping Lloyd in a coma so he can sustain a link to all of us. Fuck! Why didn't we see this sooner?"

Alex smiled grimly. "Because Krueger kept us so shit-scared, so busy looking over our shoulders, we didn't have time to figure it out. He's been playing us from the start, toying with us, just like he said he would."

"So how do we stop him?" Peter asked.

Alex remembered Kat's vision about one of them murdering Lloyd. Killing him would sever the link between all of them and Krueger, but she had no intention of murdering someone to save herself. That would make her no better than Krueger.

"Well, Alex, you've got all the answers," Chris said. "What do we do?"

"We've got to find a way of waking Lloyd," she replied. "While he stays in that coma, we'll never beat Krueger. Come on." Alex went to leave the garden but stopped abruptly at the entrance. A police car was cruising the hospital grounds, two bored cops inside lazily scanning the surroundings. Alex pressed herself back into the bushes, keeping Chris and Peter behind her, out of sight. The vehicle stopped outside the hospital's main entrance.

"You think they're looking for us?" Chris whispered under his breath.

Alex shrugged. "We can't risk going past them. We'll have to wait."

***

The sheriff was still standing outside the Sutherland house when news came through about the burnt body further along Elm Street. Malone and Goodman had found a dead man roasted to a crisp at Christopher Harris's home. More accurately, Malone had found the body, since Goodman was still outside puking his guts up when

Williams arrived. The sheriff tried to get some answers from Goodman without success. It was all the vomiting cop could manage to weakly jerk a thumb toward the house. Malone emerged from the front door as Williams approached. "Dispatch says you've got a burns victim in there. Does it look suspicious?"

The matter-of-fact female cop stepped aside so the sheriff could see the charred remains in the hallway. "Goodman spotted that one through the window so I kicked in the door. Once inside I realized Mister Crispy wasn't the only thing stinking the place out. We got two more victims upstairs, both of them as well done. Three of a kind, you might say." Williams had to admire Malone's stone-faced resolve. Most Springwood cops were like Goodman: weak-assed, weak-minded wastes of space busy marking time until retirement. Malone had transferred in from Cincinnati and there wasn't much that fazed her. "Nothing useful left of their faces and I haven't checked for ID yet," she continued, "but I'd guess and say this one is the father, Gideon Harris. Upstairs you've got what looks like his wife —she's in the bedroom, fried alive on the mattress—and their young daughter. Girl can't have been much older than seven or eight."

"Is she...?"

Malone nodded, swallowing hard. "Torched, like her parents. She grimaced. "We find the sick bastard who did this, I'm going to enjoy attending his execution. Pity we don't use the electric chair anymore. It'd be poetic justice."

Williams moved quickly through the house, confirming for himself what Malone had seen. Strangely, it was the mother's body that upset him more than that of the little girl. If the woman's corpse was that of Mrs Harris, she'd been wearing a dressing gown like the one he'd bought his own wife last Christmas. A few scraps of singed fabric hung limply over the edge of the mattress; a mute testament to the ferocity of this murder. She must have burned to death in less than a minute. What kind of accelerant had the killer used to achieve such an effect Strangely, there was none of the usual smells Williams associated with arson attacks: no gasoline stench, no whiff of alcohol in the air. If he didn't know any better, the sheriff might almost believe the poor soul had spontaneously combusted.

He emerged from the house pale and sweating, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. He smiled at the female officer. "Good work, Malone. You better stay here and keep the scene secure until the forensics team arrives. Could be hours before they get here. Mopping up what's left of Heather Sutherland is taking some time." She nodded and shrugged. Goodman had recovered enough to stagger over and join the conversation.

"I'll stay with Malone," he offered, still wiping the last flecks of puke from his chin. "Best if there's two of us here in case the perp comes back."

"Forget it," Williams snarled. "Malone can handle herself until another car arrives, and I doubt our perp is returning. You came here first, right?"

Goodman nodded.

"So nobody's been to the O'Mahoney place yet?"

"I guess not, sheriff."

"You guess not." Williams activated his radio. "Dispatch, put me through to the officer with Mrs Corwin." Within a minute the sheriff confirmed everything was fine at 1428 Elm Street. He marched toward his car. "Goodman, you're with me."

"Where are we going?"

"To do your job. Seems the only way I can trust you is if I come too."

***

Alex and the others could hear the police car's radio crackling from their hiding place. From this distance most of the messages were a haze of static and background noise while the two cops in the car slumped in their seats. But a direct call roused the pair. "Sheriff wants you at Elm Street. Triple homicide. Officer on the scene needs backup until the coroner arrives. Get over there and now, he said."

"A triple homicide?" Chris glanced at the others, bewildered. "I don't understand. I thought only Heather was dead."

"Shhh." Alex hissed. They listened intently as the cops in the car responded to their summons, asking for the full address.

"It's 1498 Elm Street. Two adults, one male, one female, and a girl, all burned alive. Sheriff suggests you stand guard outside, leave the rest to the coroner." The police car drove away, leaving the hospital entrance unguarded. Peter started toward the main doors but neither Alex nor Chris moved.

"That address: 1498," Alex said to Chris. "That's your place."

"They're dead," he whispered. "Somebody murdered my family."

"Burned them alive," Alex added. "What happened, Chris?"

He took a few moments to react to her question. "What?"

"Why did you do it?"

Chris laughed, hollowly. "I don't believe this. You think I burned my own family to death? Are you out of your fucking mind?"

Alex took a step back from him. "We all saw what you can do, what happens when you get angry. That's what Krueger wanted you to do, let all that rage inside you escape, so it burned and burned and burned. I can understand why you'd hurt your father, but why your mother? And your sister? What did they ever do to you, Chris?"

His face was a mask of shock. He looked from Alex to Peter, and then back again. "You can't think... You can't believe... I wouldn't... I'd never hurt Mom or Marion. I loved them."

"Loved them—past tense. You say that like you've known they were dead for a while," Peter observed.

Chris shook his head, his eyes brimming with tears. "How can you say these things to me? My family is dead and you're accusing me of killing them. This is fucking crazy. I didn't do it. You hear me? I didn't do it."

"You made a deal with Krueger," Alex said softly, keeping her distance from Chris while edging closer to Peter. "I saw it in one of my dreams. You said you'd kill for him, if it would save you. This was the price you had to pay, to become his disciple. I saw it all, Chris."

He shook his head, seemingly unable to grasp what she was saying. "You saw me? But I never... I wouldn't do that."

"I didn't know it was you," Alex conceded. "But I knew it was one of us. Who else would have a reason to kill your family, Chris? Me? Peter? You heard what the police radio said; they were all burned alive. You *must* have done it."

"But I don't... I couldn't have..."

"Krueger could have been controlling you when it happened," Peter said kindly. "He used you to hurt them. You probably weren't even aware what was happening when they died. It must have been like you were sleepwalking or something."

Chris shook his head vehemently. "You're wrong, both of you. I haven't made any deal with Krueger and I didn't murder my family. If they are dead, Krueger must have done it and now he's framing me, making it look like I'm the murderer. But I'm innocent. I would never hurt my sister or my mom."

"And your father?"

"Yeah, I hurt him before, but that was an accident. I told you about that. I would never *kill* him, no matter how much I hate him." Chris held out his hands to them. "You've got to believe me, I didn't do this."

"Chris, I'm sorry..." Alex began.

"Don't." he warned. "I can't believe you think I'd..." Chris gave up trying to persuade them and ran off, disappearing between the trees.

Alex realized she'd been holding her breath, waiting to see what would happen next. "Shit, I thought he was going to burn us too."

"Yeah, I kept expecting my clothes to catch fire." Peter frowned. "God, you don't think he killed Heather too?"

"No. He was more shocked than either of us about what happened to her." Another thought occurred to Alex. "What if we're wrong about him, Peter? For all we know Krueger's strong enough to kill for himself outside dreams."

"Maybe," Peter said. "What can we do about it, either way?"

"Get Lloyd out of his coma, like we planned. That'll take away one of Krueger's weapons against us." She took hold of Peter's left hand and led him to the hospital entrance, eager to get inside.

***

Roy yawned and stretched, determined to stay awake. Once visiting hours were over for the afternoon, the burns unit fell quiet as the grave. Several patients had been released yesterday and none of

the children's beds were occupied for the first time in more than a month. Roy was glad of that. He hated seeing young patients brought in with burns. They faced years of treatment and skin grafts to repair damage done in a moment, usually out of carelessness. But he was often as sad to see them leave. Despite their injuries, kids brought a life and vitality to the place adult burns victims seldom did.

Take the patient in the last room on the left. Lloyd didn't have any burns, but Roy had seen enough of that ravaged face to know the patient would never be the life and soul of the party again—if Lloyd ever came out of his coma. So it was with some surprise Roy noted the blinking red light indicating that the call button had been activated in Lloyd's room. Nobody had visited the comatose teenager today, so either someone else was pushing the button or else Lloyd had come out of his coma.

Roy hurried along the corridor to the last door on the left and walked inside. "So, feeling better?" But Lloyd was exactly as he'd been when Roy last checked in on him an hour earlier. There was nobody else in the room either. Then who pushed the call button? Roy stuck his head back out into the corridor. "Is anyone out here?" No reply. Maybe it was a problem with the button itself, these things sometimes went on the fritz. Roy approached the bed and leaned over the patient to get a better look. "Excuse me, Lloyd," he muttered, pressing his head against the wall to see if something was amiss with the button.

"You're excused, you fat fuck."

Roy jumped backward, startled by the snarling, sneering voice. He searched the room but still couldn't see anyone else present.

"I'm over here, loser."

The orderly jumped again and then smiled with relief. It was Lloyd after all, the voice had come from Lloyd. "Jesus, you scared the shit out of me."

"I wondered what that stench was."

"Hey, Lloyd, there's no need to be abusive," Roy warned.

"Why the fuck not?"

"I know you've just woken up from a coma, but that's no excuse for being rude, okay?"

"Come here and say that, blimp boy."

Roy scowled. He'd only known Lloyd a few moments and already he was hating this guy. Maybe I should get a transfer to another unit. I don't like the idea of looking after this asshole for the next few months. Roy stepped closer to the bed. "I said there's no call for you to be abusive, Lloyd."

"We'll see about that." One of the patient's hands emerged from beneath the sheet. The overweight orderly thought it strange his patient was wearing an old leather glove, and stranger still that there were four knives protruding from the ends of its fingers. Then the blades were slicing his throat and Roy didn't have much time left for any more thinking. He staggered back across the room and into the door, a spray of crimson misting the air, great gouts of blood spurting from between his fingers. Roy gasped and tried to call for help, but all he could hear was the wet flapping of his windpipe, air whistling in and out of the slices cut through it. His legs gave way and Roy slumped to the floor. urine and blood pooling out around him. One cut to the carotid artery in the neck and you could bleed to death in less than thirty seconds: Roy remembered that from his medical training. His carotid had been severed four times. Does that mean I'll die four times as fast?

***

Krueger pulled back the sheet and rose from the bed, his phantom form solidifying as it escaped Lloyd's body. He brushed down the dirty red and green striped sweater before adjusting the angle of his battered brown fedora. Krueger wiped the blood off his fingerknives onto his jeans, adding a fresh stain to the others. He smiled, cruel lips curling upward slightly. "It's good to be back." Krueger glanced over his shoulder at Lloyd, the comatose teenager still lying on the hospital bed. "Thanks for the ride, kid. Keep up the good work!" Laughing to himself, Krueger strode to the door and tried to pull it open. But Roy's corpse was slumped against it, blocking the exit. Krueger walked through the wall instead, fading like a wraith then

becoming solid again in the corridor. He sniffed the air and grinned hungrily. "Smells like teen spirit. Time for a little hide and seek."

***

Alex and Peter hurried through the hospital's labyrinthine corridors. They rounded a corner to find the burns unit's double doors standing wide open. Alex paused, uncertainty clouding her face. "Last time I came here I got buzzed in by an orderly. He said the hospital had tightened security after a baby was snatched last year."

"So?"

Alex pointed at the open doors. "Does that look secure to you?"

"No, but that's not our problem, is it?"

"Yes, it is," she insisted. "He's already here."

"Who? Chris?"

"Krueger."

Peter glanced uncertainly at the doors again. "How can you tell?"

"I can feel him, like someone scratching the back of my mind," she said, shuddering at the sensation. "He's close. Very close."

Peter pulled her arm, dragging her closer to the burns unit. Then the sooner we get inside and wake Lloyd, the better, right?"

"I don't know. It feels different this time."

"Alex, come on." Peter let go of her and marched through the open doors. He turned around and folded his arms. "See? Nothing to worry about."

"I guess." Reluctantly, she followed him into the burns unit hallway. No sooner had Alex stepped through the double doors than they slammed shut behind her, deadbolts and electronic locks clicking into place. "Fuck, I knew it." she cursed. "It's a trap. Krueger's setting a trap for us."

Peter tried to undo the locks but they stayed shut, the doors resisting all his efforts to move them. Alex punched the switch to open them but it did not respond. Peter fetched a chair from one side of the corridor and smashed it against the reinforced glass door panels, again and again until he was out of breath. They cracked but

did not shatter. "It's no use," he conceded. "We can't get out this way."

"I'll get the orderly," Alex decided. She ran to Roy's office but it was empty. A newspaper chain cut into a line of children holding hands was draped across the desk, Roy's scissors lying beside it. "He's not in there," she said, emerging from the office. "He must be with one of the patients."

The two teenagers hurried along the corridor, checking the rooms. As they reached each doorway it slammed shut, locks clicking into place, shutting them out. Alex could see patients inside the rooms, fear and concern on their faces. Some tried to open the doors or windows, without success. Peter called to her from the other side of the hall. "Alex, it's him!"

She ran to Peter who was pointing through a glass panel in one of the locked doors. Inside, Krueger was terrorizing a young woman whose legs were wrapped in gauze and bandages. She was trying to escape through a window, but Krueger had one of her ankles in his left hand, while the four blades of his gloved hand sliced into her thighs, cutting and slashing, blood splashing the clean white floor. Alex tried to shut out the woman's screams, but they echoed in her head, the woman's fear like knives in Alex's mind. It was almost a relief when the woman died, a red pool spreading outward from her twitching corpse.

"You bastard!" Peter howled at Krueger through the door. "You want to kill someone, why don't you come after us?"

"Good idea," the monster replied and strode toward them. Krueger laughed as he shimmered through the wall before solidifying once more in the corridor with them. "You were saying?" He licked the dead patient's blood from each of his fingerknives in turn, not flinching when the blades sliced through his tongue. "So much for the appetizer. Bring on the main course!"

"No!" Peter stepped in front of Alex. "I won't let you hurt her too."

Krueger smiled and winked at Alex. "I think he's got a crush on you."

Peter looked around and saw the discarded chair way down by the double doors. He reached a hand toward it, beckoning the chair

closer but it didn't move.

Krueger's mocking laughter echoed loudly in the corridor. "What's the matter, Peter? Can't get it up?"

Peter closed his eyes, the strain of concentration evident on his face. The chair began to twitch in response, slowly sliding across the floor toward him.

"It's moving," Alex gasped. "Peter, you're doing it."

He smiled and clenched his hand into a fist, then flung it toward Krueger. The chair mimicked his movement, crumpling into a ball of metal before shooting through the air. It punched into Krueger's chest. knocking the maniac twenty feet backward in the air. He thudded into the far wall and slumped to the floor.

"I did it," Peter said, disbelievingly. But Krueger shook himself awake and began getting up again.

"Is that the best you've got, shit-head?"

Peter sent another chair hurtling toward their tormentor, then another. But Krueger brushed them aside as if the metal missiles were no more than crumpled pieces of paper. Slowly, remorselessly, he advanced on Peter and Alex. Peter looked around but there was no more furniture to use as ammunition. Krueger grabbed him by the throat and threw him through the door of the butchered woman's room. The teenager's glasses flew off as he hit the floor, one leg folding awkwardly beneath him in the pool of blood, his body still and lifeless.

"No," Alex whispered, her attention focused on Peter, willing him to get up, to give her some sign he was still alive. "No."

"Forget that little shit," Krueger whispered in her ear. "You want a real man between your legs, Alex. Come to Daddy."

"Fuck you," she snarled, ramming an elbow into his nose and smashing the bones back toward his brain. He went down with an anguished cry of surprise, black blood spurting from his features. Alex ran, desperate to get away from this monster. I've got to get to Lloyd, she screamed inside her mind. I've got to wake him up.

EIGHTEEN

The sheriff watched impatiently as Goodman knocked on the front door of Peter O'Mahoney's home. "Sorry, sir, no answer."

"This isn't a social call, Goodman. Kick the door in."

"But we haven't got a warrant. Anything we find inside won't be admissible in court, sir," the overweight officer protested.

Williams shook his head. "Trust me, this case will never get to court. Even if we do find somebody to charge, they'll plead insanity and it'll never go to trial. Now get out of the damn way." Goodman hastily stood aside as the sheriff kicked the door open. Williams drew his sidearm and went inside, Goodman following cautiously. Both of them sniffed the air.

"Smells like the Harris place all over again," Goodman commented, gulping to hold down what little remained of his lunch.

"It's coming from the kitchen," Williams decided. He advanced along the hallway toward the back of the house, sidearm held in both hands, one finger tightening around the trigger. The sheriff nodded for Goodman to cover him, then burst into the kitchen. "Oh God," he whispered. "Not another one."

***

Alex reached the door to Lloyd's room but it would not open. She hammered at the wood, slamming her shoulder against the door, all too aware Krueger was stomping toward her. Alex leaned against the glass panel in the door to see if the lock was bolted shut like all the other doors. It wasn't, but Roy's bloody corpse was slumped against the door, holding it shut.

"That fat fuck got in my way," Krueger snarled as he got closer. "Now he's getting in yours. How ironic."

Alex threw herself against the door and succeeded in moving it an inch. Another shove and the gap became half a foot, enough to squeeze an arm inside. She tugged at Roy's shoulder, pulling him to one side. That relieved the pressure against the door, making it

easier to move. She glanced back into the hallway to see how close Krueger was and ducked instinctively as his blades sliced into the door where her head had been moments before. Alex forced herself through the gap and then pushed the door shut again, all too aware of Krueger's fingerknives protruding through the wood.

His sickly, scar-ridden features pressed against the glass panel, glarIing at her. "This won't stop me, bitch. I don't need my glove to kill you."

Alex ran to Lloyd's bedside. He was still in a coma, no evidence of life beyond the bleeping of the life support machines. How do I wake someone from a coma, Alex wondered. What if it kills him? The outcome would be the same whatever the effect of her intervention, she thought. Krueger would lose his power source; his bridge to the world beyond dreams. She reached for the comatose teenager but was stopped by a crusty, rough-skinned hand closing around her throat. Krueger's glove might still be stuck in the door, but its owner was standing right behind her.

"I can kill you with my bare hands," he hissed, his tongue slipping out from between thin, cruel lips to lick the side of Alex's face. "I prefer to use my fingerknives, but if you want, I can do you this way, up close and personal."

Alex felt his other hand creeping past her stomach, sliding inside her jeans, fingers reaching further down.

"Leave her alone Krueger," a voice shouted from the window. Alex saw Chris climbing in, his face filled with rage.

"Another whelp that needs to be taught a lesson," Krueger whispered in Alex's ear. "You think he's got the hots for you too, bitch?"

"I said leave her alone, you motherless bastard!" Chris held out his hands and they burst into flame, fires dancing around each fist. "Or else I'll burn you like the people of Elm Street burnt you before."

"I gave you that power," Krueger said. "You think I'm afraid of it?"

"We'll see," Chris vowed. He pulled back one hand. "Alex, get down." She dropped to the floor as Chris flung his blazing fist forward. Flames engulfed Krueger, throwing him backward, smashing him through the wall and out into the corridor. The dirty

red and green sweater caught fire, but it was the smell of burning skin that choked Alex's nostrils. Krueger's startled screams filled the air, the sound of a tortured soul burning alive.

Chris strode around the bed and crouched beside Alex. "Are you okay?" She nodded weakly. "I had to come back," he said. "I had to help you fight him. It was the only thing I could think of to prove I didn't make a deal with that devil."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I was wrong about you."

Chris nodded. "Where's Peter?"

"I think he's dead," Alex said, admitting it out loud for the first time.

Chris straightened up. "Enough is enough," he vowed, stepping through the hole created by Krueger's flying body and moving out into the hall. "I'm gonna deal with this fucker, once and for all!" Alex watched him go and then turned back to Lloyd. She rested a hand on his shoulder.

"Lloyd, you've got to wake up," she urged. "You've got to help us!"

***

Lloyd yawned and stretched. Man, this was some totally excellent shit. He had stumbled into this field, like, ages ago and found it full of the best grass ever. Some kind soul had taken the trouble of harvesting a bushel of the leaves. Better still, it was dried and ready for rolling, along with a limitless supply of cigarette papers and his trusty Zippo with the marijuana plant embossed on its side.

So Lloyd had done what any red-blooded American teenager with a liking for getting high would do: he'd sat down, rolled himself the mother of all joints and indulged in some serious relaxation. This was the fucking life! Forget all that school shit and homework and hassles and, you know, all that shit. Drop out, tune in and get the fuck off your face; that was his idea of a good time. Lloyd had composed a little song to accompany his pleasure and he sang it to himself every now and then. "Everything seems twice as nice, when you're toking in a stoner's paradise." Just those two lines, over and over again. They never failed to make him smile. Oh yeah.

Sometimes Lloyd felt like there was something he should be doing, but he was too wasted to remember what it was. Maybe he had to be somewhere. But, shit, where could be better than here, right? Fucking A. Still, the little voice in the back of his head kept nagging at him: "You've got to help us!"

***

The sheriff crouched beside the charred body on the kitchen floor. Its clothes had been burnt away, the skin and flesh blackened beyond recognition, but the corpse was obviously male. Williams studied what was left of the face. They were going to need dental records to confirm the identity of this poor bastard, but it looked like Peter O'Mahoney was minus a father. Goodman stayed where he was at the other side of the kitchen, keeping plenty of room between him and the burnt remains "You spot something?"

The sheriff pointed to the back of the corpse's head. "This guy was shot through the brain before being set on fire. We could have a copycat killer on our hands." A burst of static heralded a message from dispatch. Williams listened, his brow furrowing. "And the coroner is sure about that?" Another crackle from the radio. "Okay. Tell him we've got another one here, same thing. Williams out."

Goodman holstered his sidearm and reluctantly joined the sheriff beside the corpse. "What did the coroner say?"

"Preliminary examination of the three bodies at the Harris place suggests all of them were shot and killed before they got burned, like this one. Torching the bodies was an after—" The radio cut him off again. Goodman also got the transmission this time.

"Dispatch to all units. Reports of screaming and violence inside the burns unit at Springwood General. Hospital security unable to gain access. Possible hostage situation. All available units, please respond."

"That sounds bad," Goodman observed. "What do you think is going on?" But the sheriff was already running from the kitchen.

***

Chris could see burning footprints on the floor, leading away from the annex entrance. The far end of the corridor was dark with no windows or lights, the only illumination provided by the dying flames on the floor. As Chris walked past them shards of glass broke beneath his shoes. All the light fittings had been smashed. "You can't hide, Krueger," Chris snarled. "You tried to turn us into monsters like you, but we're better than that!"

"Are you sure?" the monster hissed from the shadows.

"We won't kill for you, we won't do your dirty work." Chris stopped, flexing his fists so the flames re-ignited. "We're learning how to use the powers you gave us but we won't be your puppets."

"I only needed to turn one of you. One was enough."

"But you failed. You killed Kat and Heather and Peter, but Alex and me didn't give in. We beat you." Chris drew back his fists, ready to burn the bastard again. "We'll always beat you."

Krueger stepped out of the shadows. "Give it your best shot," he replied.

Chris threw flames at the murderous maniac, surrounding Krueger in scorching, searing heat, urging the fire to burn hotter than the sun. The monster screamed in pain, howling in agony as it collapsed to the floor. Krueger's cries turned to sobbing, pathetic whimpers for pity. Chris almost felt sorry for him until the sobbing changed again. The figure in the flames stood up, laughing at Chris.

"Guess I'm not as flammable as I used to be," Krueger chuckled. "This bastard's not for burning, but you are!" He pointed and a finger of flame spat across the corridor, engulfing the angry teenager. Chris screamed in agony, his high-pitched cries the sound of pain and terror combined. Krueger laughed as Chris fell to his knees, burning alive. "Somebody order a basketball player, well done?"

Chris could no longer scream, having breathed the flames down into his throat and lungs. He twisted on the floor, trying to put out the flames by rolling over and over, but still they burned him. The sound of four blades clanging together halted his movements. He turned to face the person wearing the glove with its quartet of fingerknives, expecting to see Krueger's gloating face one last time. For a brief moment Chris looked surprised. "You?"

Then the blades stabbed deep into his chest, piercing the heart.

***

Alex was shaking Lloyd by the shoulders, slapping his face as hard as she dared, anything to bring him back to consciousness. But the life support machines' readings stayed stubbornly unchanged. She heard a sound from the corridor. It was like a bowling ball approaching, as if it were rolling along an aisle. Alex glanced through the hole in the wall and saw Chris's head pass by, flames still licking at its surprised features as it rolled onward.

"He's hot stuff," Krueger's voice quipped from out of view. The monster's gloved hand appeared at the edge of the hole, its bloody blades grasping the wall, wrapping around the jagged perimeter. Alex edged away around the bed, putting it between herself and Krueger. "But I guess he won't be scoring anytime soon."

"Lloyd," Alex whispered, "this is our last chance. It's just you and me now."

"That's where you're wrong," Krueger replied. The figure from the corridor stepped into view, but it wasn't Krueger wearing the glove; it was Peter. "Your boyfriend's still in the game too."

***

Lloyd sat up in the field of weed. Damn, it was clouding over! What happened to his summer daze, man? All this good shit, going to waste with nobody to help me smoke it. Lloyd shook his head. Maybe he should get going. Nah, let's have one more joint... What harm could it do, right?

***

Williams abandoned his car outside the hospital and ran inside, drawing his sidearm. Behind him half a dozen more police vehicles arrived, all summoned from the crime scenes on Elm Street. On his way there the sheriff had cursed himself for not personally following up Mrs Corwin's suggestion that Alex might have come to the

hospital. They had known the boy who ripped off his own face, Lloyd Reeves, was in the burns unit. Williams felt in his gut they'd find Alex Corwin in the boy's room. But why was the annex sealed off? Who was holding the other patients hostage? Alex had kept saying Krueger was involved but the sheriff hadn't wanted to believe that. What if she was right?

He stormed into the reception area, closely followed by twenty uniformed cops, all armed and ready for trouble. "Which way to the burns unit?" The head of hospital security stepped forward, introducing himself as Nathan Briggs and volunteering to show the way. "Have you pulled back all your men like I ordered?" William barked as they ran.

"Yes. We're watching the entrance from a safe distance. Nobody's gone in or out since we called you."

"How many patients are in there?"

"Fifteen," Briggs said. "When we couldn't get through the security doors, I sent men to look in the windows. They reported at least one fatality, a patient called Stephanie Rudge. Looked like she was attacked by someone with a handful of knives. The other patients are trapped in their rooms. The windows are sealed shut, and so are the doors. We tried breaking in but..."

"But what?"

"The windows won't break. It sounds stupid but we can't smash the glass, no matter how hard we try. It's almost... unnatural."

Almost supernatural, the sheriff thought to himself.

Briggs slowed as they approached a darkened area. Ahead two nervous-looking men from hospital security were peering around a corner "The burns unit is the next left. All lights have gone out in the hallway and we haven't seen anything moving."

Williams paused and waited for the rest of his men to arrive giving himself a chance to catch his breath. "Good. All hospital security staff should go back to the reception area. If we need any help, we'll call you."

Briggs nodded. Once his men were out of earshot, Briggs leaned closer to the sheriff. "I did get a glimpse of someone moving in there.

He had knives instead of fingers. I thought you should know what you're up against."

"Thanks," Williams said. Once Briggs was gone, the sheriff looked around the corner at the double doors. The corridor beyond was almost pitch black. The reinforced glass door panels were cracked but didn't look like they would give way anytime soon. They were going to need another way in. It was on the ground floor so there wasn't any easy underground access. Williams looked up at the ceiling tiles. "Somebody get me a chair."

***

"Peter?" Alex stared at her lover, unable to grasp what she was seeing. "I thought you were dead."

"I had to punish him for trying to challenge my authority," Krueger replied, speaking through the boy's body. "He forgot. We made a deal."

"No! He would never..." Her words trailed off uncertainly.

"Wouldn't he?" Krueger laughed at Alex's confusion. "Don't you remember, bitch? You were there, I let you witness the whole thing."

"I thought that was Chris."

"So the cliché's true! Love is blind." Peter stepped through the hole and into Lloyd's room, his right hand flexing the glove, twitching the fingerknives. Drops of blood fell from each of the blades, staining Peter's jeans. "This little shit was so scared, he was willing to do anything to save his ass."

"I don't believe you," Alex said quietly.

"He didn't kill Kat, of course, that was all my own work. But with Heather, Peter was more than an equal partner in that piece of butchery. He's quite adept with a knife, given the chance. No wonder you've got such a soft spot for him, Alex."

"You're lying."

"Are you sure?" Krueger chuckled softly. "Getting him to kill his father was all too easy, but murdering the Harris family, that proved more difficult. He couldn't take all three at once, so I made him shoot them first and then torch the lot."

"Why?"

"You would have figured out who betrayed you sooner or later, but I wanted to keep you guessing, give myself time to grow stronger." Peter's lips opened and closed in time with Krueger's words, like a full-sized human puppet, operated by invisible strings, by an invisible master. He held up the four blades, each edge a glistening crimson. "It gave me time to get rid of Chris as well. That leaves the two of us. And you and I, Alex, we're old friends. You know I wouldn't lie to you. Tve never lied to you, have I?"

Her head sank forward, beaten. "No," she admitted.

"You want to know the best part of all this?"

Alex didn't reply.

"You inviting Peter into bed while I was lurking inside him, taking me in your hands, letting me touch you down there." Peter licked his lips in a grotesque parody of passion. "You were so sweet, like cherry pie. think I'd like another slice, Alex."

She shook her head. "Stay away from me."

"You know you want it too. You want me to hurt you, bitch. You want me to cut you, the same way you like cutting yourself."

"I don't do that anymore," Alex insisted.

Peter beckoned her closer with the fingerknives. "Come to Daddy Alex."

"I said stay away from me, you bastard!" she screamed.

"That's no way to talk to your boyfriend," Krueger said, chiding her. "Not when we've been so... intimate... with each other."

"I can't believe I gave myself to a creep like you."

"Peter played his part perfectly, the timid virgin too scared to take the initiative," Krueger laughed. He began imitating Peter's voice. "'I wasn't sure if this was another nightmare, whether it was real, whether you were real.' What a crock of shit, and you fell for it. You spread your legs like the whore you are."

"God, I feel sick," Alex murmured.

"But you'll always be Daddy's little girl," Krueger's voice continued. Peter held out his arms as if waiting to be embraced. "Come and give Daddy a hug."

"Don't make me do this," she pleaded. "If you want to kill me, just get it over with."

"Who said anything about killing you? You're going to be my special little girl from now on. Dead or alive, Alex, you'll always be mine." Peter advanced toward her, hands reaching out, the four blades hungry to cut her.

"Peter, I know you're still in there somewhere," Alex said quietly. "You've got to help me fight Krueger."

"Peter's gone, bitch."

"Fight him, Peter. You don't have to give in."

"Get ready for Freddy!" Peter lunged at Alex, fingerknives slicing through the air. She jumped sideways, the blades tearing through the fabric of her top but not her skin, yet. Peter moved another step closer, jamming Alex against the life support machines clustered around Lloyd's bed. "That's it, fight back. I always prefer it when I have to take my bitches by force!"

Alex grabbed one of the monitor screens and threw it at Peter, catching him full in the chest and sending him staggering backward. That gave her enough time to scramble over Lloyd and escape through the hole in the wall, out into the corridor. She ran toward the double doors but they still refused to open. Alex hammered her fists against the cracked glass. "Help me! For the love of God, somebody help me!"

A nervous cop emerged from the shadows outside the burns unit, trembling hands clutching his sidearm. Alex recognized him; it was the same officer who'd ignored her when she first tried to tell someone about Krueger. What was his name? Goodfellow? Goodwin? "Officer Goodman! You've got to open these doors! You've got to let me out!"

"I can't," he shouted back. "Sheriff's orders. Nobody allowed in or out."

"Fuck your orders," Alex screamed in frustration. "There's a maniac in here with me. He's already killed two people and he's gonna kill me next."

Goodman shrugged helplessly and retreated back into the shadows. Alex slammed her fists against the doors. "Come back here

and help me, you fucking coward!"

"Looks like it's just you and me," Krueger's voice announced. Alex spun round but couldn't see him or Peter in the darkened corridor. I need a weapon, she thought quickly. I need a way to hurt Krueger, to defend myself. She ran into Roy's office. The long-bladed scissors were still resting on the desk. Alex grabbed them with both hands. She could hear someone creeping along the corridor toward the office. "Come out, little bitch. Daddy wants to play."

***

Williams was first to climb into the ventilation shaft, his movements hampered by the bulky Kevlar vest. The sheriff never asked one of his officers to do something he wasn't willing to do himself. Lead by example and you'll earn people's respect; that was his policy. Didn't stop him being scared, but it was something to cling on to in situations like this. The crawlspace was like a horizontal metal chimney scarcely two foot by two foot. Get stuck in here and you'd need cutting equipment to get out again, Williams decided. He could feel the anxiety of childhood claustrophobia creeping up his spine. Concentrate on the job in hand, he told himself and began crawling forward.

It was only a dozen yards to the burns unit entrance, with another ten feet to the first ventilation grating. Reach that and they should be able to pop the vent and drop down inside. A sudden squawk of static from the radio startled him. Williams's head sprang upward, slamming into the metal roof of the ventilation shaft with a dull thud. "Shiti" He clawed a hand toward his radio. "Hellfire, Goodman. I said maintain radio silence unless the situation at ground level changed," the sheriff hissed. "Has it?"

"Sorry, sir, but the Corwin girl came to the double doors. She wanted me to let her out, said there was a maniac in there with her. Claimed there'd been two murders so far and she'd be the next victim."

"Where is she now? Let me speak to her."

"I can't. She ran back along the corridor into the dark."

"Good work, Goodman," Williams snarled sarcastically.

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't call me again." The sheriff switched off his radio before calling to the men behind him. "Okay, let's move on!" The cops resumed their awkward crawl along the ventilation shaft.

***

Alex waited until the approaching footsteps were almost outside the office. She dropped into a crouching position by the door, the scissors clutched in her hand, ready to attack. When the silhouette of her tormentor stepped into view she stabbed the scissors into his stomach with all her strength, twisting the blades savagely before pulling them out.

Peter staggered back from the doorway, disbelief on his face, bloody hands held over the jagged wound in his stomach. "Alex? You...you stabbed me..." he whispered, before collapsing to the floor.

She looked at him and realized Krueger's glove was gone from his hand. That bastard had tricked her again, sent Peter to find her, knowing she would attack him. "Peter!" she gasped, scrambling out into the corridor. Alex crouched beside him, the scissors still clenched in her right hand. "I didn't know it was you. I thought Krueger was inside you."

"He was," Peter said weakly, his face drained of color. "I tried to fight him, but he was too strong. And I was so scared... so scared..." His eyes rolled back into his head. Alex leaned over him, pressing her lips to his forehead.

"It's okay," she said quietly. "Everything's going to be okay."

Peter didn't reply. His breathing grew shallower until only the faintest gasp of air was being drawn into his lips. Beneath him a pool of blood spread slowly outward. Then he stopped breathing altogether and was gone. Alex let her tears fall on him, not caring anymore about fighting Krueger or being brave or the future. None of that mattered now.

***

In Lloyd's room Krueger was standing over the bed, his gloved hand caressing the teenager's bandaged face. "I won't be needing you much longer," Krueger said. "Soon I'll have a replacement ready." The fingerknives stretched across the bed and began slicing through the cables connecting Lloyd to his life support machines. One by one, the monitors fell silent, their screens going blank. Krueger leaned close to the dying youth. "See you in hell, fucker!"

***

Suddenly it was pitch dark in the field, like there was a total eclipse of the sun. Lloyd abandoned his latest joint and stood up. What the fuck was going on? Couldn't a man have a smoke in peace? Man, this sucked. He stomped off across the field, looking for someone to complain to. Up ahead Lloyd could make out a building in the darkness, its shell lit up from within by queasy yellow steam. Maybe whoever's in there knows what's going on.

***

Alex was still grieving for Peter when she heard sheet metal flexing nearby. She looked up and was startled to see a familiar face watching her from a ventilation grating in the ceiling. "Sheriff Williams? What are you doing?"

He motioned her to be quieter, holding a finger to his lips. "What's happening in there?" he hissed.

She moved closer to the grill. "It's Krueger, he's found a way of escaping from our dreams. He's here in the burns unit."

The sheriff pointed at Peter's body. "Who killed the boy?"

Alex realized she was still holding the bloody scissors. "I thought he was Krueger," she admitted. "Krueger was possessing him. He used Peter to kill Heather and Chris and Chris's family."

"So you killed Peter?"

"I didn't realize Krueger had let him go," she insisted.

"Stay where you are," Williams said. "We're coming in."

"No!" Alex replied. "I've got Krueger trapped in here with me. If you come in, he'll escape again. I've got to face him. I've got to

confront him."

The sheriff produced his sidearm and aimed it at her. "Put the scissors down, Alex, and step away from the body."

"For fuck's sake, I told you. Peter was possessed by Krueger. I had to kill him, it was self-defense."

"The courts will determine that," Williams maintained. "Now, put the scissors down and step away from the body. Everything's going to be alright."

"Jesus, you think I did all of this?" Alex shook her head, slowly backing away from the ventilation grill. "It was Krueger. Don't you get it?"

"Alex, come back here," the sheriff warned. "I will shoot you if I have to."

She turned and ran back toward Lloyd's room.

"Shit!" Williams squeezed his head sideways to talk to the men behind him. "That's it, we're going in."

***

Alex ran back into Lloyd's room to find Krueger standing on the other side of the bed, his arms folded, a triumphant sneer on his scarred, bestial face. "You're too late if you wanted to wake him up," Krueger said. "He's out of it for good!" The monitors around the bed were all dead, every wire and power cable sliced through. There was no sign of movement from Lloyd, his face gray and lifeless.

"You bastard, you didn't have to kill him too." Alex said.

"He's not dead. Not yet," Krueger replied. "But I don't need him anymore. I've got you as my little soldier in this world."

"I'll never kill for you," Alex vowed.

The maniac smiled. "Tell that to Peter, bitch."

"You tricked me. I thought he was still possessed."

"You thought? Who said you could think?" Krueger demanded, slowly walking around the bed toward her. "I control you, Alex: every word, every movement, everything you do. All of it is at my command."

"No, you're wrong," she said, shaking her head.

"How can you be so sure? How do you even know all of this isn't some delusion conjured up in your warped, twisted little mind?"

"I know what's real and what isn't," Alex maintained, but she could feel doubt creeping into her thoughts, into her voice.

Krueger held up his fingerknives. "Are these real? Did I use these to cut you, or did you cut yourself?"

Alex held up the scissors from Roy's office. "These are real enough! They'll hurt when I stick them through your black heart, you bastard."

"Be my guest," Krueger said, throwing his arms wide and smiling,

Alex stabbed the scissors at his chest but they passed straight through, swishing into thin air and coming out the other side.

***

The sheriff was first to lower himself into the corridor, dropping to the floor and taking a position against one wall while the others followed his lead. Once half a dozen men were in, they began to move slowly along the corridor, checking doors and locks as they went. The office was empty, Peter's dead body sprawled in front of the door. Further on they found Stephanie Rudge's corpse in her room, just as hospital security had described. All the other doors were sealed shut, but the patients inside seem unharmed.

It was Williams who found the decapitated head, accidentally kicking it across the floor in the dark. "What the fuck was that?" he hissed. Another officer bent down and came up with the head in his hands, almost dropping it again in surprise. The hair and skin had been burnt off the head, the features twisted in a screaming rictus of death. "Put that down again," Williams ordered, "and try not to fall over the rest of the corpse when we find it."

Raised voices echoed along the corridor. The sheriff gestured for his men to stop moving, then listened. He could hear Alex shouting, but the words were not distinct, as if someone was choking her. Whatever was happening, she wasn't alone. Williams nodded to the others and they resumed their progress along the corridor, creeping forward.

***

Krueger had Alex by the throat, his left hand lifting her off the floor. "Is this real enough for you?" he asked, holding the pointed end of one of his blades less than an inch from her right eye. "You still think it'll be a trick after I gouge your eyeball out of its socket?" A muffled sound from the corridor took his attention. "Sounds like we've got company. Let's continue this at my place, what do you say?"

"Go to hell," Alex gasped, struggling for breath.

"That's the idea, bitch." Krueger threw Alex backward across the room, so she thudded headfirst into the wall beside Lloyd's bed. She slumped to the floor, unconscious. Krueger smiled. "Now we play on my turf!" he said happily.

NINETEEN

Alex hit the boiler room floor with a thump, the metal surface forcing the air from her lungs, winding her. She lay among the rust and oil stains, gasping for breath, trying to get her bearings. I must have blacked out, she realized. I'm back in Krueger's domain. He's ten times as strong here and nobody's going to wake me up. I'm trapped. Her mouth filled with a bitter taste as adrenaline kicked in. Fight or flight, that was the animal instinct. Well, if I can't run, I'll have to fight.

Alex knew she needed a weapon. Her hands were empty; she must have dropped the scissors when she hit the wall. She glanced around the boiler room but could not see anything useful through the creeping clouds of steam, queasy yellow lighting blending everything together. The ear-piercing sound of metal scraping across metal cut through her nerves like a knife. He was close and getting closer. Alex could feel his excitement, his breath coming in quick gasps, the black blood coursing through his veins.

Shit, why had she gotten such a useless power from the experimental serum? Chris could throw fire, Peter had been able to send objects flying across a room. What did I end up with? Feeling what others did, sharing their emotions. Fat lot of use that was. Alex told herself to stop whining. If that's what you've got, use it. If I can feel what Krueger feels, maybe I can figure out what he's planning to do next and use that knowledge against him.

"You're welcome to try," he sneered from behind her, "but I wouldn't count on it." Krueger lunged at Alex with his fingerknives, stabbing at her. She threw herself sideways, scrambling through a narrow gap between two large metal cylinders. Ahead was a staircase, leading further down into the neglected industrial complex. Behind her the monster was laughing. "Hide and seek? Two can play at that game." He vanished, a Krueger-shaped hole left behind in the steam clouds before that too was gone.

***

Lloyd wandered through the building but couldn't find anyone else. The place appeared to be an abandoned steel works, all the machinery rusted to hell. There was nobody here, he decided. But if that was the case, where was the light I saw earlier? Lloyd noticed a doorway hidden away in a corner, steam drifting out of it.

***

In the burns unit, Williams was silently cursing his men for making so much noise. The voices in the room ahead had fallen silent a few seconds ago. Since then, nothing. The sheriff held his sidearm out, ready to fire at whatever he found, and stepped in front of the hole in the wall. Through the gap he could see a male patient on a bed, not much more than a teenager. All the wires and power cables nearby had been severed, probably by those scissors Williams had seen Alex holding earlier.

There was no sign of the girl, or of anybody else. The sheriff stepped in through the hole, checking the corners, keeping a close watch for sudden movement. But none came. Alex had disappeared. "Shit." Williams relaxed and called his men forward. "Fan out and begin searching this place properly, two by two, one room at a time. Look in every corner. I want every shadow checked twice. That girl must be here somewhere. Find her."

***

Alex turned back from the staircase, deciding to search for a weapon instead. She wasn't going to play Krueger's games anymore. A long glint of metal on the floor caught her eye, a hollow pole almost as tall as her. One end was formed into a shovel, the other finished in a sharp spike. Maybe it had been some kind of stoking device. Whatever, it was a weapon and one she could lift.

"What's the matter? Don't you want to play?" Krueger's voice goaded her from out of sight, snaking into her thoughts.

"Come out and face me," Alex shouted. "I'm not afraid of you anymore.

"You should be," he replied, "You should fear me most of all."

"Why? You're a phantom, a ghost that doesn't know when it's dead. You're only strong because we give you that strength. You're nothing without us."

"As long as there are children on Elm Street, I will always be strong. I am eternal, like fear itself. I can never be beaten."

"You died once, you can die again," Alex promised.

"Even if you could kill me, I would only rise up again. That drug trial was the first of many. I'll find other victims, other hosts." Krueger stepped from the shadows. "Don't make the mistake of thinking you're unique, bitch. I've had plenty of whores like you in my time."

"Yeah?" Alex stabbed at Krueger with her weapon, plunging the spiked end up through his neck and out the back of his skull, knocking the fedora from his head. He howled, a mixture of rage and pain, hands clawing at his neck. "Well how does it feel to be on the receiving end for once?" Alex demanded. She rotated the pole in her hands, letting it twist round inside his brain. "How does it feel to get royally screwed, Krueger?"

He grabbed the section of pole in front of him with both hands and began swinging it from side to side, smashing Alex against a wall to her left, then across and into a metal handrail on her right. She cried out in pain and let go, crumpling to the rusty floor. Krueger leaned backward and began removing the spike from his head, pulling it out a few inches at a time, retracting it until the end came free of his neck, wet with black blood. He examined the weapon that had been skewering him before tossing it aside. "You should be more careful," he said snidely. "You could have someone's eye out with that."

Krueger marched across the boiler room and grabbed hold of Alex, lifting her off the floor with his gloved hand. The blades hooked into her top, tearing at the fabric, threatening to cut through it altogether and stab into her body. Krueger drew Alex's face close to his, spittle flecking his lips as he hissed into her mouth. "Give Daddy a kiss, sweetheart." Then his mouth was clamped over hers, his fetid breath invading her lungs, his rasping serpent of a tongue pushing between her lips, exploring her mouth, probing every crevice. Krueger pulled

his face away from Alex and smiled broadly, revealing the blackened stumps of his rotting, decayed teeth. "And they say the age of romance is dead!"

Alex coughed twice, then spat the contents of her mouth into his face. "Fuck you, asshole," she muttered.

Krueger shook his head sadly from side to side. "I guess they were right." He began slapping her in the face with his left hand, first with the palm, then with the back of his hand, over and over, blow upon blow, each one harder than the last, more savage, more brutal. Alex lost count and knew only that she was being beaten to death by this bastard. She could feel darkness closing in around her.

"No, no, no!" Krueger bellowed, shaking her awake. "You don't get away from me that easily, slut! I've got you forever, remember? Besides, I've got a little secret I want to share."

***

Lloyd was walking down a spiral staircase into the billowing cloud of steam when he heard the voices. One of them he recognized from somewhere. It was a girl's voice, somebody he'd met at school perhaps. Yeah, what was her name again? Annie? Aileen? No, Alex. That was it. Alex. What was she doing down here? The other voice was a man, deep and rasping, half metal, half gravel. Lloyd had heard this guy before as well, but couldn't remember from where.

He reached the bottom of the staircase. The voices were a lot closer now. They were arguing, the man threatening Alex, taunting her. Lloyd didn't know if he wanted to get involved in this, it sounded like a bad scene. Then he recalled where he had heard the male voice before. A flash of realization washed over Lloyd, shocking him from his daze.

"I remember," he whispered. "That bastard who took my face. It's him." Another memory jump cut into his head. He was lying on a bed as the monster stood over him, cutting through the life support systems. *I won't be needing you much longer. Soon I'll have a replacement ready*. I'm dying, Lloyd realized. All those days he'd spent shit-faced in that field, he'd really been lying on a hospital bed,

out of his head on sedatives. The maniac attacking Alex condemned me to death.

***

Krueger switched hands so his left kept hold of Alex while the gloved hand explored her body. The blades slid across her skin, stroking, caressing, almost tender in their movements, if not for the implied threat of the razor-sharp edges. "I've got a replacement for Lloyd ready. Someone who will give me permanent access to the dreams of children everywhere."

"I'll never work for you Krueger," Alex vowed, peering at him through swollen eyelids. Her face was already bruising badly from the beating he had given her. "Keep me here forever, torture me all you want, but I'll never give in."

"I believe you," he said. "I had someone else in mind. You'll never guess who it is..." Before he could say anymore, a berserk scream echoed around the boiler room and a shape threw itself at Krueger Alex fell to the floor, released from the maniac's grasp.

She looked up to see someone clinging to Krueger's back, arms wrapped around the monster's head and neck, trying to throttle him. A familiar face appeared over Krueger's shoulder, smiling down at her. "Lloyd?"

"Alex, you've got to get out of here." he shouted. Krueger slashed his blades across Lloyd's arm, slicing through skin and flesh, cutting deep into the bone, bringing a scream of pain from his attacker.

"Get off me, you little shit!" Krueger snarled, hacking at Lloyd, twisting round and round, trying to shake him off. But Lloyd clung on tenaciously, still calling to Alex between cries of pain.

"This fucker's been lying to you. Kill me and he can't hurt you anymore. He can't hurt anyone."

"But what about you? I can't leave you here." Alex protested.

"I'm already dying, Krueger made sure of that." Lloyd shouted back. "Get out of here, I'll keep him busy."

Alex nodded, looking for some way of waking herself up, searching the floor for something to hurt herself with, hoping that would shock

her back to consciousness, but there was nothing. Behind her Krueger had gotten hold of Lloyd and roughly tossed the teenager to one side. The maniac turned and ran at Alex, his fingerknives reaching for her. She threw up a hand to defend herself and three of the blades stabbed through it, slicing between her bones. Alex screamed in agony and—

***

—came to on the floor beside Lloyd's bed. Blood spurted from the three wounds in her hand, spraying Alex in the face. She saw the scissors lying on the floor beneath the bed and grabbed them in her good hand, clutching the handle firmly in her grasp. There was movement out in the corridor, the sound of men talking. The cops must have come in through the ventilation shaft while I was unconscious, she realized. I've still got time.

Alex looked at Lloyd. His body was in spasm, twitching and fighting, every movement he made in the dream world reflected here on the bed. Alex knew what she had to do. At any moment Krueger could burst into this reality. She knew killing Lloyd was the right thing to do, that he was already dying, that it would make no difference to him. And she knew what she had to do was inevitable, the fulfillment of Kat's vision for this moment

Alex pulled the scissors into the air, preparing to plunge them down into Lloyd's chest, but she couldn't go through with it. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I can't do it."

***

Williams heard the whispered words from out in the corridor. His men had searched every inch of the burns unit, with the exception of those rooms still sealed off by some unknown force. There was no sign of Alex Corwin, no sign of anybody else here, and certainly no sign of Krueger. The sheriff was about to give up when he heard the girl speaking. Shit, she must have doubled back, got past them somehow. The sheriff crept toward the hole in the wall, his sidearm raised, finger at the trigger, ready to fire. Through the gap he could

see the girl standing beside the bed, her back to him, that same pair of scissors as before held up in the air. At any moment she could stab them into the teenage boy. The patient was convulsing on the bed.

"Freeze!" Williams commanded. "This is Sheriff Williams, Alex. I have you covered with my weapon. You cannot escape."

"I'm not trying to escape," she replied, not moving.

"I want you to drop those scissors before someone else gets hurt."

"I can't do that."

"Drop those scissors or I'll be forced to take preventative action, Alex."

"I have to kill him, sheriff," she said, her voice eerily calm.

"Why? What's Lloyd ever done to you?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me." The sheriff motioned for two of his men to take positions on either side of him, covering the girl with their weapons. Once they were in place, Williams lowered his own sidearm. "Why do you have to kill your friend?"

"Krueger is using him to attack us. As long as Lloyd remains alive, we can never be safe."

"Alex, that doesn't make sense. Murder can never be justified."

"Lloyd's already dying," she said. "He told me so, in my nightmare. See how he's twitching? That's Lloyd fighting Krueger in the dream world. He told me to do this, sheriff. It isn't murder, it's a mercy killing."

"He's dying because you cut his life support systems. Everything else... You're sick, Alex. You're not thinking straight. That drug they gave you, it must have been a bad batch. You'll be able to claim temporary insanity, diminished responsibility. I promise, this will never go to trial. Now, why don't you put the scissors down and we'll get doctors in here and see if they can't save Lloyd, okay?"

Alex could feel the strength draining from her hand. Tears were streaming down her face. She knew what she had to do, but finding the strength to do it, that was the hardest part. Talking with the sheriff, that was just a distraction. Suddenly Lloyd opened his eyes and looked at her. But when he spoke, it wasn't with his own voice. It was Krueger talking

"You're too late, bitch. I don't need this body anymore." He started laughing at her, mocking and taunting her, goading her with his voice.

"Fuck you, Krueger!" she screamed and stabbed the scissors down into Lloyd's chest with every last ounce of her strength. Alex collapsed forward over his body, hugging him as he died beneath her. "I'm sorry, Lloyd. I'm so sorry."

EPILOGUE

Joyce drove through the streets of Springwood, admiring the leaves of ochre and brown as they tumbled from the trees along the roadside. Autumn had come with surprising swiftness this year, cold winds blasting across Lake Erie from the Canadian border. Soon it would be winter and the town would be fighting through snow and sleet and ice. Life went on, the seasons replacing one another as they always had. If you didn't know any better, you would think this was a typical American town, no different from any other.

Joyce turned her car into the long, tree-lined avenue with which she was becoming so familiar. Hard to believe it was five months since the events of that terrible week, since her world had fallen apart in an orgy of violence and death. Five months since Alex was arrested and charged with the murders of eight people, most of them her classmates from school. The resultant news media feeding frenzy had broken over this town like a storm, with camera crews and reporters flying in from around the world to get their own piece of the story. How did a teenage girl become such a cold blooded killer? Why did she choose such outlandish methods of slaying her victims? And what did these brutal murders have to say about the state of American society?

At least Joyce had been spared the horror of reliving it all in court during the long months of a trial. A team of psychiatrists had examined Alex and concluded she was clinically insane, putting any prospect of a trial beyond question. Instead Joyce's little girl had been committed to spend the rest of her natural life incarcerated at psychiatric institutions, preferably those with maximum-security quarters.

So, once a week, Joyce made her way up the long drive to Westin Hills, the hospital where Alex was being kept now. She didn't know how much longer she could face making the journey. Alex hadn't said a word since being arrested in the burns unit at Springwood General, moments after killing her final victim. There had been questions about the conduct of the police: why hadn't they acted sooner to stop

her? Why was the Teen Terror (as the tabloids liked to call her) allowed to claim one last life? Sheriff Williams had been forced to resign for nor stopping Alex when he'd had the chance.

Joyce almost wished he or his men had pulled the trigger and killed her. At least Alex would have been out of her misery then. At least I wouldn't have to come here and see what is left of my daughter, she thought while parking her car. It was being repossessed tomorrow. Joyce had lost her job. Nobody wanted to employ the single mother of a mass murderer. Since Alex wasn't fit to stand trial, Joyce felt she had been judged guilty by the court of public opinion instead. Hate mail cluttered the letterbox at 1428 Elm Street, along with dog excrement and God knows what else. She'd been forced to move out, living like a fugitive in different motels. Her life was falling apart around her and there was nothing she could do about it. The people of this town would never forgive what her daughter had done, and they would certainly never forget it.

Unless Alex gives me some sort of sign today, I won't be coming back, Joyce decided. If she would acknowledge my presence, even notice there was somebody else there, I'd feel like I wasn't wasting my time. I know it seems like I'm abandoning you Alex, Joyce thought as she walked in the main entrance, but I've got to have a sign. Otherwise ! might as well leave: the town, the state, even the country. I've still got to have a life, even if you've given up on yours.

***

It took Joyce twenty minutes to get through all the security procedures at Westin Hills's maximum-security wing. Officially, these were meant to ensure none of the inmates could ever escape and that none of their friends could facilitate any attempt to break out. In Alex's case, it was as much for her own safety. Death threats were still arriving in their dozens each week and two parcel bombs had been sent for her. Plainly. those that wanted her dead didn't bother to read anything more demanding than the supermarket tabloids, otherwise they'd have seen articles about Alex's catatonic

state. She wasn't given any mail because she didn't read any mail. She didn't read anything.

Joyce was ushered into the small square room by an orderly in a white shirt and pants. The ceiling, floor and all the walls were white except the one Joyce was facing. That was reinforced inch-thick glass, with a black blind drawn down over it. The air was scented with faint traces of sandalwood and lavender, pumped in through the ventilation system. Recent research had suggested such smells could help pacify the most violent of patients. There were no windows or skylights anywhere in maximum-security at Westin Hills, they would only torment the inmates. The orderly brought in a chair for her and then retreated to the door.

"Ready?" the orderly asked.

Joyce nodded, taking a deep breath. The orderly hit a button on the wall beside the door. Motors whirred into life and the thick black blind began slowly retracting into the ceiling, inch by inch revealing the room on the other side of the glass. "You need anything, knock on the door," the orderly said, as he always did. "I'll be right outside." He backed out through the door, locking it after himself, not looking at what the visitor had come to see.

Joyce steeled herself but was still shocked by Alex's appearance. Her daughter was secured inside a straitjacket, the white sleeves wrapped around her torso, pinning her arms to her sides. Below the waist she was wearing a pair of white pajama bottoms, stained with blood and God knows what else. Her hair had not been cut in five months—the orderly once told Joyce that Alex became uncontrollably violent whenever she saw scissors or blades—and was now past shoulder-length, spilling in front of her face. As Joyce watched, her daughter twisted a foot around so she could chew the toenails.

Alex was being kept in a padded cell, every surface except the reinforced glass wall heavily upholstered and covered with coarse canvas. Once visiting time was over, the glass would be covered by another padded wall to ensure the inmate's safety. After gnawing at her toenails for more than a minute, Alex had fashioned one of them

into a jagged edge. Joyce watched, horrified, as her daughter dug this freshly created edge into the opposite foot, drawing blood.

Once the red liquid began to drip, Alex twisted round so she was lying on her back. Lifting the bloody foot into the air. Alex used it to writing a word on the nearest padded wall. Judging from the many messages scrawled on the walls in red, this was a common activity for her daughter, but it still distressed Joyce. She went to the door and knocked, calling to the orderly. "She's doing it again." Joyce said quietly. He nodded and closed the door again.

Joyce didn't watch when two other orderlies entered the padded cell She tried not to listen to her daughter's wordless howls of protest as the foot wound was dressed and restraints were put on Alex's legs. Only once the orderlies had gone did Joyce look at her again.

"Alex? It's Mom. How are you feeling today?"

The teenage girl did not respond, drool appearing at her lips and then running down her chin.

"Honey, I know this isn't easy for you, but it isn't easy for me, either."

Alex hummed a little to herself, head rocking from side to side.

"I need you to give me a sign, some indication you even know I'm here. I know it's a lot to ask, but I need it."

No response.

"Please, Alex, I can't keep coming here unless you give me hope. I've lost my job, the house. The car's being taken tomorrow. But I'd keep coming back, no matter what it cost, if you'd give me a sign, anything. Anything at all."

Alex rolled over into a corner and then used the two walls as a brace to lift herself up to her feet. She staggered across the uneven surface of the padded floor, moving closer to the glass wall.

Joyce moved nearer the glass too, hoping against hope her prayers were being answered. "Alex? Honey, if you can hear me, just nod. I'll know, okay?"

Alex leaned against the glass and began licking its surface with her tongue, saliva rolling down toward the floor.

Joyce began crying, unable to hold herself together any longer. "Please, Alex, give me some hope..." But her daughter did not

respond. content to keep licking the glass wall. "Alright." Joyce said finally, drying her eyes. "I'm leaving now. I don't know when I'll be back, if ever. I hope you're happy in whatever world you've retreated to. I do hope so. She knocked on the door and the orderly let her out. Joyce didn't look back.

***

A few minutes later the orderly returned to collect the chair. He paused and looked at the young woman pressing her face against the glass partition. The swell of her pregnancy was becoming obvious, even through the straitjacket. The news she was carrying a baby emerged during presentencing psychiatric testing and had added one more layer of scandal and intrigue to this infamous case. Nobody knew who the father was, Mrs Corwin insisting her daughter was still a virgin despite medical evidence to the contrary.

The orderly smiled at Alex. "How's my favorite bitch feeling today?" he whispered to her, evil eyes glinting with pleasure, the kindly face slipping for a moment to reveal another set of features. "I told you I had a replacement ready for that loser Lloyd. I hope our child isn't hurting you too much with his kicking and clawing. He's a feisty little fucker, isn't he? Takes after his old man. Still, only another few months to go." He laughed at her and then let himself out of the visitor's room.

Alex staggered across the padded cell and leaned against the far wall, her gaze sliding over the words she had painstakingly written with her own blood: *One, two, Freddy's coming for you. Three, four, better lock your door...*

***

Inside Alex's womb the fetus stirred, conscious of its father being close, so very close. Its hands stretched against the soft tissue surroundings, tiny fingernails clawing and scratching for a way out. The fetus's evil eyes opened and looked around, glinting with pleasure. Yes, this little bastard was the spitting image of its father.